

Historical Semiotics as a Possible Derivation From Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923-1929)

Grigori Khislavski

University of Erfurt, Erfurt, Germany

Samuel Khislavski

Independent Researcher, Frankfurt, Germany

This article presents Historical Semiotics as a potential analytical tool within Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923-1929). In doing so, it attempts to conceptualize history as a system of signs. Relevant concepts, such as the historical sign, aim to operationalize the otherness of historical textual worlds for the subject of cognition and to sharpen the boundaries of epistemology with regard to the historical object of cognition. The interdisciplinary field of anti-Semitism research is targeted as an example of the application of Historical Semiotics.

Keywords: philosophy of culture, animal symbolism, historical semiotics, historical sign, linking text and mind

Introduction: Ernst Cassirer's Conception of Man as Animal Symbolicum and the Resulting Implication of Conceiving History as a System of Signs

Building on Ernst Cassirer's (1874-1945) fundamental epistemological premise that humans do not perceive the world directly, but rather, imbued with sensory impressions, transform it into their own intellectual worlds of expression—such as language, myth, art, and science—that is, shape and comprehend the world through a system of signs (Cassirer, 1923/1925/1929), this article aims to propose a set of semiotic analytical tools in the form of Historical Semiotics, which seeks to do analytical justice to those various systems of interpretation that Ernst Cassirer calls “symbolic forms” from a diachronic perspective (Khislavski, 2025). This analytical treatment applies, on the one hand, to Cassirer's concept of culture.¹ Culture would thus entail a continuous process of anthropological self-emancipation. According to Cassirer, this self-emancipation manifests itself precisely in man's ability to create symbols or signs. Through them, man rises above mere dependence on nature to become a subject, because it constructs its own “ideal” world (Cassirer, 1979a, pp. 67-73).

This world is relational depending on the symbolic form and the subject that produces this form, although according to Cassirer, there are also supposed to be historical invariants (Cassirer, 1979b, pp. 103-111).² According to Cassirer, therefore, one does not study historical man by dissecting biological remains or merely listing data on power structures, but rather by reconstructing and interpreting his forms of intellectual expression.

Grigori Khislavski, Ph.D. in Medieval History, Visiting Researcher, Department of History, University of Erfurt, Erfurt, Thuringia, Germany.

Samuel Khislavski, Independent Researcher, Frankfurt, Germany.

¹ The idea of linking Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of culture, philosophy of history, and semiotics with Historical Semiotics originates with the co-author of this article and my son, Samuel Khislavski.

² Historical Semiotics does not subscribe to the notion of historical invariants.

Crucial to the semiotic conception of anthropology and cultural history is Ernst Cassirer's dictum regarding humans as symbol-creating beings, the *animal symbolicum*, which stands in epistemological opposition to the Kantian *animal rationale*:

Reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man's cultural life in all their richness and variety. But all these forms are symbolic forms. Hence, instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*. (Cassirer, 1944, p. 44)

Since man is an *animal symbolicum*, he leaves his mark exclusively through symbols or signs. For Cassirer, researching history means reading culture as a text (Cassirer, 1944, pp. 217-230). Based on this premise of historical philosophy and semiotics, the following article will attempt a rudimentary formulation of the idea of a semiotic historical science—the Historical Semiotics. The complete theoretical framework and its application can be found in Grigori Khislavski's monograph of the same title (Khislavski, 2025).

Key Aspects of Historical Semiotics

The development of Historical Semiotics is intended—following Cassirer's design—to implement a triadic schema: Reflection on – Theorizing about – Application of historical semiotics. In other words, theory formation results from reflection on the relevant scientific system and should prove itself in practice.

Here, history is understood as a human science. The reflection on the nature of history as a human science is the subject of the first part of my book (Khislavski, 2025, pp. 15-96). This follows a minority position held—though without reference to Cassirer—by some philosophers (cf. e.g. Tejera, 1984) and, to my knowledge, by a single historian, Aron Gurevich (1924–2006), who was particularly close to the Tartu School of Semiotics (Gurevich, 1983, p. 169). The advantage of this position is that history could be modeled according to the criteria of scientific theory and, if necessary, rethought. Possible approaches to rethinking history based on the assumption that it is not merely a narrative or hermeneutic discipline, but rather a science, can—again, without reference to Ernst Cassirer—already be found in the work of philosopher Thomas Mulvany Seeböhm (1934–2014), who, however, did not develop a coherent theory for the scientification of history (Seeböhm, 2015). This has epistemological and praxeological consequences that are reflected in theoretical and methodological approaches as well as terminology used in the present theoretical framework.

History, which in most academic cultures is considered a humanity in accordance with the humanistic *studia humanitatis* and only in the German and Dutch traditions, in the vein of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) as literally the “science of the human spirit” (*Geisteswissenschaft* or *geesteswetenschap*) (Dilthey, 1883) and, in German, explicitly as the “science of history” (*Geschichtswissenschaft*), is a very broad field. Due to specialization, it cannot usually be tackled by one researcher alone.

By chance and circumstance, however, the developer of Historical Semiotics has conducted research and published in various historical disciplines, while at the same time having the privilege of teaching history to young people in a curricular, i.e., holistic sense. He has therefore dared to develop a form of historical semiotics that deals with history in general (Khislavski, 2025).

However, in order to better distinguish the specifics of this historical semiotics from “conventional” semiotics, which mainly deals with recent phenomena (cf. e.g. Trifonas, 2015), the focus should lie on pre-modernity, particularly in light of Cassirer's conception of the philosophy of culture and cultural history (Cassirer, 1944).

There, temporal distance goes hand in hand with linguistic and cultural differences, which ultimately empirically legitimize the claim of a history as a human science that goes beyond conventional hermeneutics and philology.

What appears to function smoothly in contemporary history, especially when eyewitnesses are still alive, namely understanding the people who figure in history or even make it, or seeking to identify with them, which is to act emically as a researcher, quickly reaches its limits in the pre-modern era. Umberto Eco (1932-2016) succeeded in summing up this point better than entire books with a single concluding Latin sentence in *The Name of the Rose*:

Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus. (Eco, 1984, p. 291)³

Historical semiotics therefore favors an etic approach, in which the dynamic process of observation, analysis, and writing is based on a scientific system. This system is constituted by its basic elements: the subject of cognition, the instruments of cognition, and the item of investigation. It is assumed that the subject of cognition is only able to explore a part of the whole and therefore needs instruments that go beyond his or her hermeneutic training or experience and ultimately exist independently of him or her.

This system has a boundary generated by terms that refer to the world of history in the sense of ontic reality—in the case of history as we see it, to the textual or semiotic world—but do not originate from the vocabulary of that world. In other words, the subject of cognition uses a different language than the people who appear in the history it is exploring. As these people from history have long been silent, the subject of cognition cannot learn their language from them. It learns it to the extent that the remnants of the text world allow. Seen in this light, this systemic boundary makes clear that the ontic reality of these people, namely the world of history, that is, for example, the world of the ancient Greek *polis*, the Roman *ciuitas*, and the medieval *monasterium*, remains accessible only through historical signs contained in the texts and artifacts that originate from this world.

Depending on the time and location, the state of preservation and condition of these historical signs can vary greatly. Research into these historical signs is based on the idea that history can be thought of as a science system, which could look as follows:

However, researching historical signs requires that the subject of cognition also has to define what it means by them. There are several initial considerations here that embed historical semiotics in existing research paradigms on the one hand and highlight its originality and novelty on the other. These are based on the connection between human cognition and language.

For historical semiotics, written language, as manifested in texts, has priority. In this regard, Historical Semiotics is particularly closely aligned with the first volume of Cassirer's *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Cassirer, 1923).

From a text-scientific perspective, the history of the transmission of a historical text or sign requires additional theoretical effort on the part of the subject of cognition. Consequently, they must know how language is structured as a cognitive subsystem, as a knowledge and coding system, and as a sign system, and how it can be researched from a historical perspective. To this end, they should engage with linguistic methods and theories.

³ Probably the best English translation of this concise sentence is: "Yesterday's rose endures in its name. We hold empty names." (Haft, White, & White, 1999, p. 30).

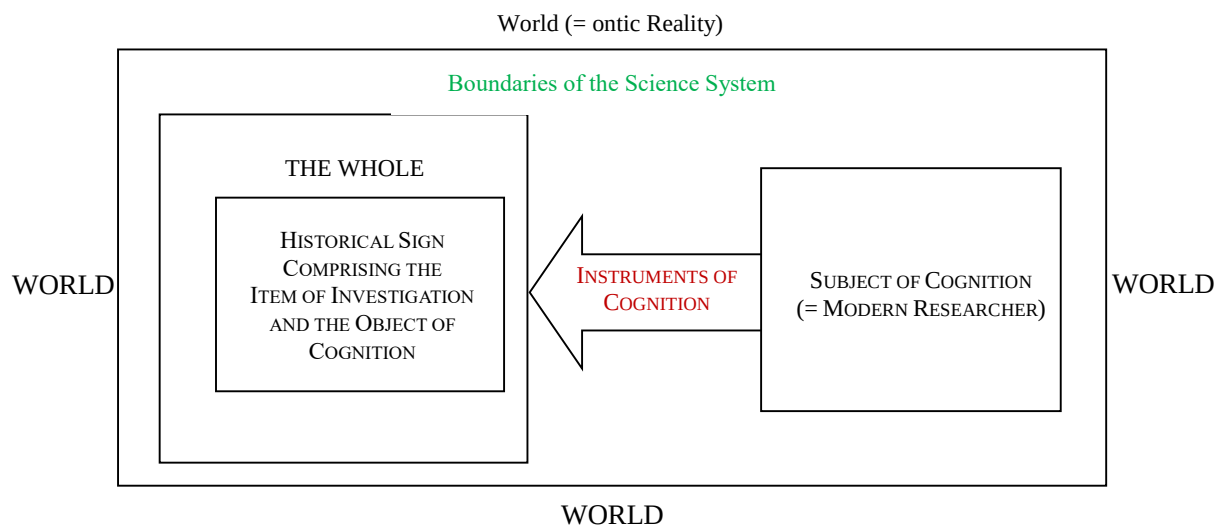


Figure 1. History as a science system.

The first idea of the connection between cognition and language can be traced back to Aristotle (384-322 BC). For him, “spoken sounds” were “symbols of affections in the soul”, and “written marks symbols of spoken sounds.”⁴

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) took up this idea most clearly when he believed that language is a “key to the invisible human soul.”⁵ This notion has become firmly established in cognitive science in general and in cognitive linguistics in particular (Pinker, 2008). Furthermore, since Marc Bloch (1886-1944), the *Ecole des Annales* has focused on studying “men in time”, rather than merely the history of things, ideas, wars, or empires. For Bloch, this anthropocentric history literally advanced to “a science of men in time” (Bloch, 1964, p. 27).

Historical semiotics, which understands history as a scientific system, aims to build on this. Its Item of Investigation, the historical sign, therefore comprises not only the historical text, but also the person who produced it, or, to use the terminology of cognitive science, it also encompasses the mental representations of this historical text producer. These manifest themselves in what this text producer has written in and about history. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the item as such, which is tangible for the subject of cognition,⁶ and the inaccessible mental representations of the text producer. The historical-semiotic definition of the latter follows the conceptualization of the modern researcher. In both cases, the term cognition is highly significant.

However, the essential difference between these elements of the given science system lies in the passive role of the historical text producer within it, which means that he or she must be referred to as an object of cognition. This object is represented by the item of investigation.

⁴ “Ἔστι μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ τῶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ παθημάτων σύμβολα, καὶ τὰ γραφόμενα τῶν ἐν τῇ φωνῇ.” (Ackrill, 1963, p. 43).

⁵ “Schlüssel zur unsichtbaren menschlichen Seele.” (Herder, 1772, p. 43).

⁶ This tangibility refers to the materiality of the historical artifact or text and not to its originality. In other words, many historical originals have been lost in the course of history and only copies or transcripts exist. These, in turn, were edited in later centuries. Consequently, it makes sense from a methodological point of view to distinguish between editions, which are the product of philological work, and the historical texts that are the object of this philological work. Historical texts take on a new quality through digital editions because many sensory, especially haptic, experiences cannot be had on a screen, unlike with a printed book or even a codex. In this context, both printed and digital text editions represent historical reality, albeit in different ways. Given this state of transmission, the semiotic approach is particularly useful because it distinguishes between ontological reality and the representation of this reality. Historical signs represent historical reality, but do not replace it.

The historical sign as a basic element of historical semiotics as a scientific system, alongside the subject of cognition and instruments of cognition, thus consists of an item of investigation (call it text or written sign per se) and the object of cognition (call it historical text producer, sign user, or the mental representation system of the historical sign user):

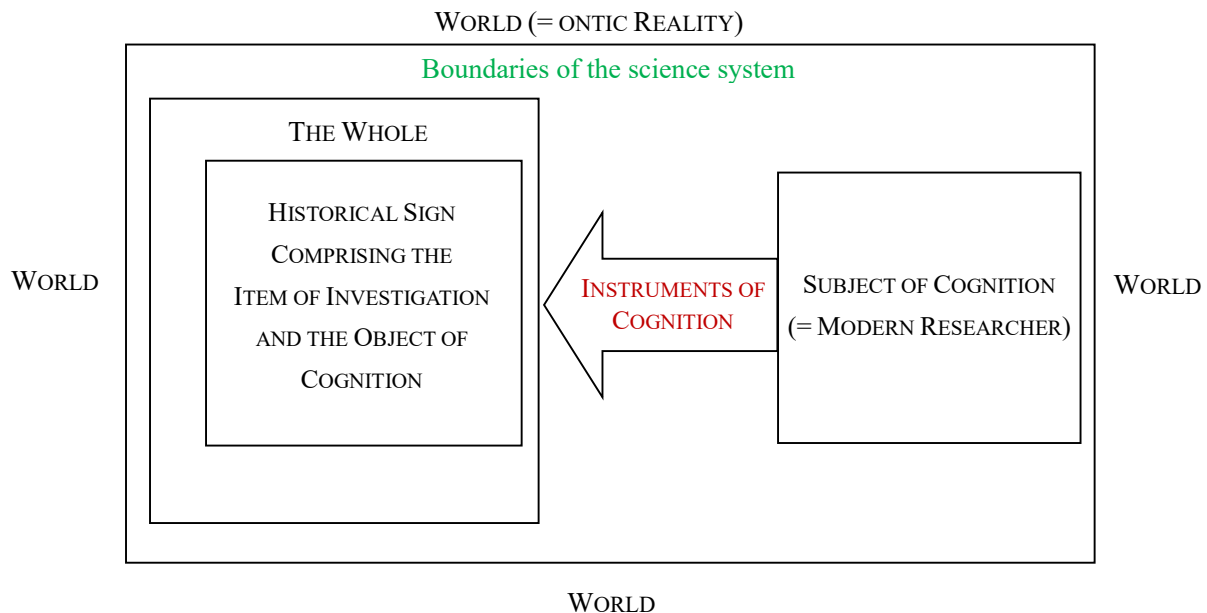


Figure 2. Historical semiotics as a science system.

Historical semiotics is intended to serve as a tool for researching history as represented in various ways through texts or historical signs. Part two of this book is devoted to its development.

From a praxeological perspective, the historical-semiotic approach determines the “how” of a research practice. Historical semiotics also reflects the scientific nature of history as a human science. If historians were to engage in this, they would first define for themselves what they understand by science and how this science could work in practice. This is done here in the author’s manner. It is based on an understanding of science in general and of history as a human science in particular. According to this understanding, science is the development and application of theory. There is no science without theory.⁷ The true or false nature of a scientific theory is determined experimentally or empirically. In this context, experiment also refers to the ability to comprehend a nomological statement intellectually or conceptually.

There is no theory and therefore no science without terminology or a system of terms (Budin, 2001, pp. 15-16).

Scientific terms must be precise because they are used to designate *referents* from the real world by means of a *sign vehicle*, i.e. by assigning them a *sense*, which should adequately capture the informational, material, and conceptual nature of an entity or a *referent*.⁸ The prerequisite for this is the “triadic mediation” of all sign correlates (Nöth, 1990, p. 89). Here, considering the ontological nature of the referent, an informational and

⁷ In this regard, we share Niklas Luhmann’s idea of science, who defines the value of theory for a scientific system as follows: “There is no science without theory; theoretical orientation is therefore a universal feature of belonging to the scientific system.” (Luhmann, 1990, p. 412 [Translation of original quote in German]).

⁸ I use the umbrella terms of the Triadic Sign Model or the Semiotic Triangle (cf. Nöth, 1990, pp. 89-90).

semantic coherence must be established between the corresponding sense and the sign vehicle. This assignment of sense manifests the connection between language and the world (Rodríguez, 2015, p. 90). Conversely, in order to be able to explore the world, it must be clear how the complex and dynamic, culturally and cognitively determined system of knowledge, coding, and signs that is language works and how it relates to the world (Rodríguez, 2015, pp. 95-96). Such clarity is necessary not only because the researcher or the subject of cognition should be able to express the information he or she perceives, i.e., information that is based on the senses and can be experienced sensually, in words or concepts as the basis for mental representations (Newen & Vosgerau, 2020, pp. 178-180).

From a history perspective, a distinction should be made between linguistic and historical information, since historical linguists, who have recently been consulting classical philology with increasing frequency, are interested in different things than historians when they read texts. Lyle Campbell, for example, explicitly refers to linguistic rather than historical information in his introduction to *Historical Linguistics*:

In the use of philology for historical linguistic purposes, we are concerned with what linguistic information can be obtained from written documents, with how we can get it, and with what we can make of the information once we have it. (Campbell, 2020, p. 366)

This distinction also presupposes that the mere transfer of linguistic methods to historical texts, which seems to have been popular in classics and classical linguistics for some time, is not sufficient for historical science.⁹ Rather, unlike in classical linguistics, linguistic models must not only be applied to historical texts, but also modified by historians.¹⁰ When historians further develop cognitive science models and apply them as historians, they are required, according to historical semiotics, to complete a dual thought process. On the one hand, they need to decode their sources, which have now become historical signs for them, by modifying these cognitive science models. This modification primarily affects cognitively generated concepts or mental models that have no sensually experienceable referent in the world, i.e., that are not based on sensory perceptions but have been generated in the mind and stored as mental concepts (Duncan, 2025, pp. 2-4). This applies above all to religious phenomena such as eschatological thinking. The challenge here is to analyze complex historical texts according to varying degrees of informational quality. The textual complexity results, for example, from literary conventions adhered to by these texts. Thus, many medieval texts are peppered with Bible references and are therefore topical. Therefore, the modern subject of cognition cannot fully grasp their semantics. For historians

⁹ Seven and six years ago, respectively, several compendiums were published that attempted to transfer cognitive science theories and methods to the classics. Since then, it seems, this topic has fallen silent again. What these works have in common is that they treat ancient languages, primarily Ancient Greek and Latin, as if they were modern languages such as contemporary English, German, or Russian. In other words, the historicity of the linguistic material does not prompt the contributors to make any additional theoretical or methodological effort. The relevant compendiums are listed here by date of publication: Jeroen Lauwers, Hedwig Schwall and Jan Opsomer (eds.), *Psychology and the Classics: A Dialogue of Disciplines* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), Maurizio Bettini and William Michael Short (eds.), *The World through Roman Eyes: Anthropological Approaches to Ancient Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Egle Mocciaro, William Michael Short (eds.), *Toward a Cognitive Classical Linguistics: The Embodied Basis of Constructions in Greek and Latin* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), Peter Meineck, William Michael Short and Jennifer Devereaux (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Classics and Cognitive Theory* (London/New York: Routledge, 2019).

¹⁰ Here, historians could build on the efforts already made by the Classics. There, conventional linguistic models were adapted to the exclusion of cognitive linguistics and cognitive science. Cf. Georgios K. Giannakis, Panagiotis Filos, Emilio Crespo and Jesús de la Villa (eds.), *Classical Philology and Linguistics: Old Themes and New Perspectives* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2023). As mentioned above, the modification and application of cognitive science models would first have to be implemented. This additional theoretical and methodological effort appears necessary in order to do justice to both the texts and their producers, who are each represented by historical signs.

dealing with religious systems and practices in the pre-modern era, the range of objectives and tasks of semiotically determined research in history, which is intended to be developed into a historical semiotics in the sense of a human science, would consequently be even more complex. Consequently, another issue is to precisely determine the information filters that separate the subject of cognition from the object of cognition. On the other hand, the subject of cognition must proceed introspectively and describe what it reads from the texts as historical information using cognitive science terms. This would be a step toward the development of historical semiotics, which continues to value its philological and hermeneutical roots but increasingly sees itself as a human science. Thus, historians as subjects of cognition would not only be expected to argue and interpret in a coherent manner. Rather, in historical semiotics, it must be made transparent how the subject of cognition arrives at his or her convictions, theses, and statements. The subject of cognition would also be required to state what it is unable to comprehend and investigate, even though its predecessors have provided highly convincing interpretations of what cannot be understood according to the standards of human science. The subject of cognition should therefore not (only) believe, but (also) be able to put into terms, on the basis of which analytical or methodological means (instruments of cognition) it makes one statement or another, or considers the statements of others to be right or wrong.

For historians, this self-reflective, evaluating skill, which could only be practiced or trained using specific terminology, methodologies, and theoretical approaches from the cognitive sciences, would be just as important as, for example, knowing the life dates of Charlemagne, the names of tax officials in Byzantium in the 9th century, the background to the failure of the crusade against the Ottomans to liberate Constantinople in 1464, the great project of the humanist pope Pius II (1458-1464), or the increasingly endangered skill of translating the *Ablativus Absolutus* or a *Coniugatio Periphrastica* into a modern language.¹¹

In order to heuristically explore text repositories that are extremely complex from a philological point of view, new tools from the digital humanities would have to be used in addition to the traditional basic or auxiliary sciences such as paleography or sphragistics. This gives rise to exciting problems that recently have been investigated not only in terms of intertextuality but also in terms of heteronomy (cf. e.g. Bracht, Harke, Perkams, & Vielberg, 2022). However, it remains questionable whether the corresponding hermeneutics can do without instruments of cognition such as cognitive linguistics that enable the subject of cognition to distinguish, for example, between concrete and abstract as informational states in long-term memory (LTM) and in the mental lexicon and to explain how these mental representations come about.¹²

Rather, knowledge of the above terms appears to be a prerequisite for anyone who deals with various aspects of human life on the informational basis of texts to be able to research these aspects scientifically. Applied to biblical hermeneutics, for example, this would mean, among other things, that the subject of cognition would have to conceptualize or name in descriptive language the cognitive and cultural differences and similarities between themselves and the people who produced and first received the New Testament. This requires the use of

¹¹ When translating, too, consideration should be given to the latest findings in translation studies with regard to creating cultural coherence between the source and target languages.

¹² Concrete concepts are internal, sensory-based mental representations (i.e., informational states) in long-term memory that can be traced back to tangible references in the non-linguistic, i.e., material world. Thus, they possess a concrete reference object in non-linguistic reality. As abstract concepts, cognitive science and cognitive linguistics refer to informational states in long-term memory that are internal to the system but not sensory-based. This means that their triggers cannot be experienced sensually. Abstract concepts have no reference object in the non-linguistic world, but are cognitive constructs (Strik Lievers, Bolognesi, & Winter, 2021, pp. 641-670).

terms. These terms can be identified, for example, at the semiotic level of analysis. This identification of terms goes hand in hand with an intrinsically motivated awareness of language and language use. According to this view, words are not “just” words, but also actions or speech acts (Searle, 1969). Furthermore, they are coded signs, information carriers, and means of communication. Ultimately, they are products of cognition. Bundled together into a systemic whole, they form texts. In the course of this language sensitization, the subject of cognition opens up to various relations to which a text is subordinate and then arrives at terms and concepts such as discourse and text world model (Whiteley, 2026, pp. 200-203). Thus, the historical view of texts is complemented by the linguistic view.¹³ Following the assumption expressed at the outset that language forms the window into the human mind, it seems obvious to locate the field of application of historical semiotics in those areas of historical research that are dedicated to the human dimension of history. The choice here falls primarily on Marc Bloch¹⁴ and Aron Gurevich, who advocated an anthropological or anthropocentric approach to history (Gurevich, 1992). This book thus has its place in anthropological or anthropocentric historical science. Its contribution consists in equipping this once articulated but unelaborated and theoretically unsupported field of research with a scientific toolkit in the form of historical semiotics. The term anthropocentric refers here to the primary research goal of historical science as interpreted by the first generation of the Annales School, which is to study “men in time” (Bloch, 1964, p. 27). From a historical-semiotic perspective, this goal can be achieved if history is conceptualized as a textual science, since the study of humans is based on the information contained in texts, i.e., written language. However, the link between history and language proves to be even more direct, again from a semiotic point of view. Proceeding from the basic assumptions of Russian cultural semiotics and its view of history, as represented by Boris Andrejevič Uspensky (1937), history can be conceptualized as a language that is semiotically read, or decoded (Uspenskij, 1991, p. 6). Uspensky calls this view of history “semiotics of history.” Historical semiotics, however, is not understood as a special way of looking at history, but as a theoretical toolkit that can be used to support this (or another) way of looking at history. Furthermore, the attribute “historical” suggests that this toolkit has a different understanding of signs. Unlike linguistic signs, which are the subject of linguistic research, historical signs represent a different informational and cultural quality.¹⁵

Linguists’ hermeneutic prior knowledge of signs goes back to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), who imagined the linguistic sign (*le signe linguistique*) as a sheet of paper (*une feuille de papier*) with the sign sequence, i.e., a graphemic image (*signifiant*), and on the back the corresponding meaning or content (*signifié*) could be seen (de Saussure, 1916/1971, p. 183).

All subsequent sign models, such as those developed by Karl Bühler or Charles William Morris, can be traced back to Saussure’s sheet of paper (Seuren, 2016, pp. 830-831). In pre-modern times, however, the familiar sheet of paper cannot be assumed to have been a universal writing material and information carrier; rather, it was

¹³ It should be noted that the linguistic view is inextricably linked to the historical one, as it itself emerged from the history of linguistic research (Cf. e.g. Koerner & Asher, 1995).

¹⁴ In the very personal text of *The Historian’s Craft*, the anthropocentric view of history resembles a legacy to future generations of historians, as Bloch simultaneously refers to the legacy of his forebears: “Long ago, indeed, our great forebears, such as Michelet or Fustel de Coulanges, taught us to recognize that the object of history is, by nature, man. Let us say rather, men. Far more than the singular, favoring abstraction, the plural which is the grammatical form of relativity is fitting for the science of change. Behind the features of landscape, behind tools or machinery, behind what appear to be the most formalized written documents, and behind institutions, which seem almost entirely detached from their founders, there are men, and it is men that history seeks to grasp. Failing that, it will be at best but an exercise in erudition. The good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.” (Bloch, 1964, pp. 25-26).

¹⁵ This different quality of historical signs corresponds at the same time with the concept of Otherness in cultural anthropology (Leistle, 2015, pp. 291-313).

the piece of parchment or, in ancient times, the papyrus scroll.¹⁶ In fact, it was often a palimpsest whose *signifiant* and thus its *signifié* exists multiple times, even if additional instruments are required to make the initially invisible visible. In the case of a palimpsest, the difference between the mediums becomes obvious (Gippert, 2025, pp. 1-15). This difference makes it necessary to develop additional models for describing historical semiosis, the most important of which should be the historical sign.

It is important to anticipate and address potential misunderstandings on the part of the recipient. Historical semiotics aims to construct an adequate, i.e. falsifiable, model of the historical sign. It is not a matter of reconstructing the historical sign in its concrete context. In the absence of a time machine, this is just as impossible as communicating with the producers or users of historical signs. In other words, it can only be a matter of adequate model formation. “Adequate” means “fair to the item of investigation”. In other words, if linguistics assumes a sign model that is conceptualized on the idea of a sheet of paper, then this sign model is anachronistic, as it is reduced to the categories of thought and imagination as well as to concepts of the modern sign system with paper as the main writing material. Correctly, this sign model must be supplemented by the “pre-modern.” In other words, the modeling of the historical sign must also address parchment or papyrus as writing materials and information carriers. Here, the modern mind encounters seemingly insurmountable difficulties in theoretically grasping these historical information carriers with regard to the content and expression of the sign. In a palimpsest, for example, it is difficult to determine which sound image and which idea should be in the foreground: the original or the subsequent ones? This question arises with particular urgency when one thinks of Cicero’s *De re publica* or the palimpsest of Archimedes (Declercq, 2007, pp. 7-22). It is up to the current user of the sign to decide which historical sign system to prioritize. However, the parchment potentially contains several sign systems at the same time, so that the conventional sign model is a priori doomed to failure in the face of the cultural diversity of the pre-modern era. Consequently, when modeling historical signs, the difference between the medium and the contemporary sign system must be taken into account.

The next problem concerns the edition itself. It should not be confused with the historical text in the sense of a parchment manuscript.¹⁷ Once again, it was Umberto Eco who playfully anticipated the problem of editing medieval manuscripts in his impeccable medievalist and paleographic introduction to *The Name of the Rose*:

At the same time, I consulted illustrious medievalists such as the dear and unforgettable Étienne Gilson, but it was evident that the only *Vetera analecta* were those I had seen at Sainte Geneviève. A quick trip to the Abbaye de la Source, in the vicinity of Passy, and a conversation with my friend Dom Arne Lahnstedt further convinced me that no Abbé Vallet had published books on the abbey’s presses (for that matter, nonexistent). French scholars are notoriously careless about furnishing reliable bibliographical information, but this case went beyond all reasonable pessimism. (Eco, 1984, pp. 5-6)

In other words, a source edition is a completely different type of information carrier than a parchment manuscript, as it was created in a different period and produced using different tools. This means that a source edition conveys the focus of the recent sign system on what is referred to as history. This results in a clarification of the attribute “historical” in the syntagma historical sign: “historical” literally refers to linguistic signs that originated in other epochs and thus also in other cultural systems and are now, ideally, to be constructed, i.e., interpreted,

¹⁶ There is a wealth of research literature on the Manuscript Age. The following two studies are, it seems to me, the most important ones on this subject: Hannah Ryley, *Re-using Manuscripts in Late Medieval England: Repairing, Recycling, Sharing* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, York Medieval Press, 2022) and Nuria de Castilla, François D’Éroche, and Michael Friedrich (eds.), *Libraries in the Manuscript Age* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2023).

¹⁷ Of course, there are many copies of many of the parchment codices and manuscripts, so that here too the question of the historicity and originality of the medium or the sign carrier arises.

hermeneutically against the background of the recent language system in the sense of the historical author.

The main difference to the established empirical-semantic approach lies in the assessment of the interpretability of historical signs. Historical semiotics assumes that their interpretation, i.e., their construction of meaning for specific epochs (namely for the pre-modern era), is not gradual but fundamentally different from that of linguistic signs in recent sign systems. The epistemological skepticism is all the greater because we cannot make transparent the extent to which the horizons of understanding of the descriptive language and the object language merge, nor which horizons of understanding belong to which descriptive language and which object language.¹⁸

In *The Name of the Rose*, again, Umberto Eco described this sometimes confusing merging without reflecting on it theoretically in relation to the transmission of Adson's manuscript as follows:

On sober reflection, I find few reasons for publishing my Italian version of an obscure, neo-Gothic French version of a seventeenth-century Latin edition of a work written in Latin by a German monk toward the end of the fourteenth century. (Eco, 1984, p. 6)

As a synthesis of history and linguistics, historical semiotics therefore asks whether and how historical reality can be explored on the basis of texts. Furthermore, it aims to develop a new understanding of historical reality.

The Application of Historical Semiotics in Research on Anti-Semitism

Once this has been worked out, historical semiotics will be applied to interdisciplinary research on anti-Semitism. This is also the aim of the third part of the already published monograph on historical semiotics. (Khislavski, 2025, pp. 241-511). The main focus will be on the informational and representational significance of Jews as concrete and abstract entities in the mental representation system¹⁹ of the writing minority.²⁰ The cognitive science conceptualization or modeling of the functioning of the human knowledge system allows precise questions to be formulated that follow the falsification logic of modern science. Given that knowledge is stored and organized in global patterns (frames, schemes, scripts, mental models), whereby cultural, social, mental, and cognitive elements of these patterns are interconnected and the knowledge stored and organized in this way can be activated at any time in the form of knowledge bases, the following questions arise for the topic outlined above:

¹⁸ The term object language refers to the language of the historical sign system. In other words, it corresponds to the language of the object of cognition. Descriptive language refers to the language of the recent, i.e., modern sign user. In other words, it corresponds to the language of the subject of cognition.

¹⁹ Mental representation system is part of a complex cognitive organ for processing and storing information that is received consciously or unconsciously from outside. Mental representations are therefore information about ontic aspects of reality that has been processed and stored in a certain way. The intentional aspect of these mental representations is expressed in linguistic form or can be inferred from it (cf. Smortchkova, Dołęga, & Schlicht, 2020).

²⁰ The term "writing minority" expresses not only the informational provenance and quality of the written information carriers used to analyze the topic at hand. In relation to the preferred *modus operandi* (anthropocentric history) it correlates with the expression "silent majority," which appears in the title of a widely read book by Aron Gurjewitsch from 1990 *Средневековый мир: культура безмолвствующего большинства* (Москва: Искусство, 1990) (The Medieval World: Culture of the Silent Majority). This further signals that the focus of the study is not on "simple," i.e., non-writing people, but on the authors or producers of these written information carriers, who mostly belonged to the (high) clergy or monasticism. At the same time, this raises the question of the extent to which the mental representation systems of the text producers are also representative of the people of the Middle Ages or the pre-modern era, who were generally illiterate.

1. Does hatred of Jews represent a global pattern (in the sense of a frame²¹) for organizing cultural knowledge?²²

2. Or does it rather constitute one form of knowledge among many, organized and stored in a superordinate frame that corresponds to the common knowledge of a cultural community (or, in this case, a part of it—namely, its writers)?²³

Questions 1 and 2 raise the fundamental question regarding the organization of the mental representation system (and the associated anchoring of conceptualizations of Jews and Judaism) of the writing minority in the pre-modern era:

3. How is knowledge about Jews and Judaism organized in the mental representation system of the writing minority, how is it linked to other bodies of knowledge, and how is it framed (culturally, socially, cognitively)?

These questions harbor a number of methodological gaps, as they require reference to written information carriers from the manuscript age, whose state of preservation and transmission differs significantly from that of the digital age. These gaps correspond to informational hurdles relating to both the texts themselves and their producers.

In both cases, the methods of cognitive linguistics are insufficient because the determinacy of texts and text producers is dependent on the historical period and thus fundamentally different in the manuscript age than in current text production.

Taken together, these hurdles reflect the cultural otherness of pre-modern people, whose mental representation system is to be studied on the basis of written information carriers.

Although the theoretical principle of cognitive linguistics (“language is a window into human nature”) is applied here, the different nature of the historical sign means that the methods established in cognitive linguistics need to be supplemented and, in some cases, replaced by other tools that take into account the informational and cultural character of signs handed down from other epochs and are therefore historical. It will quickly become apparent that even the term historical sign is not immediately understandable in cognitive linguistics because the associated definition of reality, which is derived from the reality problem of onto-epistemology and evolutionary epistemology, is fundamentally different. Unlike in cognitive linguistics, it must be assumed with regard to historical signs that reality exists independently of the researcher's cognition. Thus, historical signs exist even when they are not in the current context, i.e., in the focus of the reader. At first glance, this fundamental difference presents a problem of understanding and acceptance, but on closer inspection it proves to be productive because it allows the necessary distance from the historical text to be established and the differences between “present” and “past” to be clarified.

As a result, the model of “conceptual antisemitism” (Schwarz-Friesel & Reinhartz, 2017, p. 18), which currently seems to describe the phenomenon of hostility toward Jews most precisely, could be supplemented with important aspects. This would allow for the phenomenon itself to be defined more precisely and analyzed in greater detail with regard to its specific nature.

²¹ The term “frame” was first coined by the US sociologist Erving Goffman and subsequently found widespread use in linguistics. As a linguistic term, it describes bodies of knowledge that are organized as static connections between units of world knowledge. These frames have typical slots that are provided with fillers. If a recipient is familiar with the respective frame, they can assign the words of a text to these slots stored in their world knowledge when understanding the text, or supplement them by means of inference from their world knowledge (Cienki, 2007, pp.170-175).

²² The term cultural knowledge refers to the cognitive-anthropological concept of the cultural model or, as a derivative, the “folk model of the mind” (D’Andrade, 1987, pp. 115-120).

²³ Here I refer to the concept of cultural memory developed by Jan Assmann. This concept corresponds to a frame insofar as cultural memory refers to collective or intersubjectively shared knowledge (cf. Assmann, 2011, pp. 72-74).

Hence, in addition to a theoretical goal, a practical purpose of this book is to demonstrate the applicability of historical semiotics to relevant historical fields with a distinct contemporary relevance.

Conclusion and Outlook: Historical Semiotics as a Potential Tool for Understanding Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*

Historical Semiotics and Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* fit together remarkably well and complement each other like theory and practice. While Cassirer provides the philosophical foundation, Historical Semiotics examines the concrete textual and visual sign systems as they evolve over time.

Both approaches share the fundamental conviction that we have no direct access to a "naked" historical reality. Culture and history are only handed down to us and accessible because humans have encoded them in signs (texts, images, myths, rites).

Cassirer describes the development of the human mind as a dynamic process (e.g., the transition from mythical to scientific thinking). Historical Semiotics provides the very tool for this: it empirically analyzes how the meaning of concepts and symbols shifts over the centuries.

Both approaches reject attempts to explain cultural phenomena in purely materialistic or economic terms. A historical symbol (such as a crown or a religious image) possesses its own potent reality that transcends its material value.

Despite the harmony, there is a subtle difference in the field of research:

1. Cassirer is a transcendental philosopher: He seeks the universal conditions of the possibility of culture. He is interested in the overarching system of the mind.

2. Historical Semiotics is a cultural studies discipline: It operates within a cultural-historical, text-based, and empirical framework. It analyzes concrete "traces" and artifacts.

It could be said that Historical Semiotics is the practical application of Cassirer's insight that humans are *Animal symbolicum*. It examines the actual symbols that this animal has left behind throughout its history.

References

- Ackrill, J. L. (Trans.). (1963). *Aristotle's categories and de interpretatione*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bloch, M. (1964). *The historian's craft*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bracht, K., Harke, J. D., Perkams, M., & Vielberg, M. (Eds.). (2022). *Heteronome Texte. Kommentierende und tradierende Literatur in Antike und Mittelalter*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.
- Budin, G. (2001). A critical evaluation of the state-of-the-art of terminology theory. *Journal of the International Institute for Terminology Research*, 12(1-2), 7-23.
- Campbell, L. (2020). *Historical linguistics. An introduction* (4th ed.). Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- Cassirer, E. (1923/1925/1929). *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. 3 vols. (Teil 1. Die Sprache, Teil 2. Das mythische Denken, Teil 3. Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis). Berlin: Bruno Cassirer.
- Cassirer, E. (1944). *An essay on man. An introduction to a philosophy of human culture*. Yale University Press.
- Cassirer, E. (1979a). Critical idealism as a philosophy of culture (1936). In D. P. Verene (Ed.), *Symbol, myth and culture. essays and lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935-1945* (pp. 64-94). New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
- Cassirer, E. (1979b). The philosophy of history. In D. P. Verene (Ed.), *Symbol, myth and culture* (pp. 95-143). New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
- Cienki, A. (2007). Frames, idealized cognitive models, and domains. In D. Geeraerts & H. Cuyckens (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of cognitive linguistics* (pp. 170-175). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- D'Andrade, R. (1987). A folk model of the mind. In D. Holland & N. Quinn (Eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought* (pp. 115-120). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Saussure, F. (1916/1971). *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916). Paris: Payot.
- Declercq, G. (2007). Introduction: Codices Rescripti in the early medieval West. In G. Declercq (Ed.), *Early medieval palimpsests* (pp. 7-22). Turnhout: Brepols.
- Dilthey, W. (1883). *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte*. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.
- Duncan, J. (2025). Construction and use of mental models: Organizing principles for the science of brain and mind. *Neuropsychologia*, 207, 1-10.
- Eco, U. (1984). *The name of the rose*. New York: Warner Books.
- Gippert, J. (2025). Removed and rewritten: Palimpsests and related phenomena from a cross-cultural perspective. In J. Gippert, J. Maksimczuk, and H. Sargsyan (Eds.), *Palimpsests and related phenomena across languages and cultures* (pp. 1-15). Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.
- Gurevich, A. (1992). *Historical anthropology of the Middle Ages*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gurevich, A. J. (1983). Medieval culture and mentality according to the new French historiography. *European Journal of Sociology*, 24, 167-195.
- Haft, A. J., White, J. G., & White, R. J. (1999). *The key to "The Name of the Rose."* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Herder, J. G. (1772). *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache, welche den von der Königl. Academie der Wissenschaften für das Jahr 1770 gesetzten Preis erhalten hat*. Berlin: Christian Friedrich Voß.
- Khislavski, G. (2025). *Historische Semiotik als textwissenschaftliches Erkenntnisinstrumentarium der (anthropozentrischen) Geschichtswissenschaft*. Erfurt: Digitale Bibliothek Thüringen, https://www.db-thueringen.de/receive/dbt_mods_00068215
- Koerner, E. F. K., & Asher, R. E. (Eds.). (1995). *Concise history of the language sciences: From the sumerians to the cognitivists*. Cambridge: Elsevier Science.
- Leistle, B. (2015). Otherness as a paradigm in anthropology. *Semiotica*, 204, 291-313.
- Luhmann, N. (1990). *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Newen, A., & Vosgerau, G. (2020). Situated mental representations: Why we need mental representations and how we should understand them. In J. Smortchkova, K. Dołęga, and T. Schlicht (Eds.), *What are mental representations?* (pp. 178-212). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Näth, W. (1990). *Handbook of semiotics*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Pinker, S. (2008). *The stuff of thought: Language as a window into human nature*. London: Penguin.
- Rodríguez, C. (2015). The connection between language and the world: A paradox of the linguistic turn? *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 49, 89-103.
- Schwarz-Friesel, M., & Reinharz, J. (2017). *Inside the antisemitic mind: The language of Jew-hatred in contemporary Germany*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press.
- Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Seebohm, T. M. (2015). *History as a science and the system of the sciences: Phenomenological investigations*. Heidelberg/New York: Springer.
- Seuren, P. A. M. (2016). Saussure and his intellectual environment. *History of European Ideas*, 42(6), 819-847.
- Smortchkova, J., Dołęga, K., & Tobias, S. (Eds.). (2020). *What are mental representations?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strik Lievers, F., Bolognesi, M., & Bodo, W. (2021). The linguistic dimensions of concrete and abstract concepts: Lexical category, morphological structure, countability, and etymology. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 32(4), 641-670.
- Tejera, V. (1984). *History as a human science: The conception of history in some classic American philosophers*. Washington, D. C.: University Press of America.
- Trifonas, P. P. (Ed.). (2015). *International handbook of semiotics*. Dordrecht/Heidelberg: Springer.
- Uspenskij, B. A. (1991). *Semiotik der Geschichte*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Whiteley, S. (2026). Text world theory. In J. Alber and R. Schneider (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to literature and cognitive studies* (pp. 200-213). New York: Routledge.