innovation and obsolescence. He felt he could not continue to master all of the new software programs coming out at an accelerating pace and still devote his energy to what he cared about most, crafting words.” I hope it is not the case that only our students will be able to collaborate on works through the crossdisciplinary courses that we will be creating. I’d like to think that in the future I will be able to collaborate on and produce works in new media rather than simply comment on them.

Works Cited


Reviewed by Elizabeth Giddens, Kennesaw State University

*Discourses in Place* sets forth an analytical method called geosemiotics that researchers may use to analyze the meanings inherent in public settings, the sign systems encountered in the material world, and the actions that people take in reference to both settings and their signs. The
book focuses on public signs such as traffic and street signs, commercial signs for businesses, and logos for brands of commercial goods. It also describes a method for investigating how people—either individually, in pairs, groups, or crowds—orient themselves toward and respond to public signs and spaces. The authors’ two express purposes are to unite methods of diverse fields (discourse analysis, linguistics, communication, cultural geography, and anthropology) to aid in the analysis of “sociopolitical structures of power in the world around us” and, for scholars, to “extend the studies of semiotic systems beyond the analysis of the grammars of languages into the grammars of ‘texts’ taken in [a] much broader sense.”

Written and arranged as a textbook, the book’s concepts are fully explained and precisely illustrated with many examples and photographs. The central chapters are divided into sections on theory and practice, with the latter including suggestions for assignments and observations that students (or researchers) might perform. The book contains a glossary and index to facilitate comprehension and field use. The glossary is particularly helpful, allowing readers to remind themselves quickly of the definitions of several key terms, some of which have non-intuitive meanings.

The basic method directs a researcher to observe and categorize elements of a scene, particularly a public one. The key elements to note are the social actor(s) and the expressions they give off, the interaction order (the interactions of people in a culture as singles, couples, groups, and so on), the visual semiotics of street and commercial signs (whether they are narrative or conceptual, their use of color, and their composition and implied relationship to viewers), and the place semiotics of signs (the languages they are composed in, their orientation for reading, their aesthetics and durability, their placement, and their purposes). For example, consider a directional sign in a train station providing an indication of where to find car rental bureaus. The overhead sign is located in a public place to be read by travelers alone or in groups. Though permanent, it is not decorative in style, yet it consists of words in three languages, an icon of an automobile, and an arrow pointing the way. Since the French words, location de voitures, are located at the top of the sign and appear in much larger letters than the English or German words, one may surmise that French is the preferred language, as indeed it is in Paris, where the sign was located. One might also note that all the languages are European, a selection that recognizes certain cultures and ignores others. Thus, one can identify “the three fundamental principles of geosemiotics”:
indexicality, meaning that physical signs derive meaning from their placement; dialogicality, meaning that they operate in conjunction with other signs and cultural discourses; and selection, the concept that signs and their readers select “important” meanings and background or ignore others.

The method heightens readers’ awareness of the potential meanings of situational and cultural details, somewhat in the way that reading a mystery novel prompts one to ask questions about details in the story to sort out potential clues to a crime. To the extent that the book teaches thoughtful observation, then, it achieves a broad usefulness for all sorts of readers—semititians, linguists, critics, and students. But if it encourages hasty inferences about cultures—about why the signs in a particular place are as they are and why people seem to react to them as they do—unsubstantiated by other means, then it may undermine its own benefits by subverting attention to cultural differences into value-loaded judgments. I mention this unfortunate possibility only because many of the authors’ examples arise from cross-cultural comparisons, and although they seem to be expert in the cultures they discuss, this component of their analytical practice is not emphasized. It is easy to see, for instance, how geosemiotic principles might be applied by professional writers as they draft and revise many genres of public information documents because the principles would help writers unpack the cultural assumptions they may unwittingly use to construct messages that they intend to be transparent. For individuals functioning within a culture they know well, the method may help them identify cross-cultural semiotic boundaries—designs, placements, phrases, and words that are idiomatic and need to be reworked to facilitate more accurate translations by individuals from other places. Consequently, geosemiotics seems especially promising for researchers and practitioners of World Englishes.

But alone the method is not sufficient for individuals to interpret the meanings of signs within foreign cultures. It is true that physical signs are cultural artifacts and people’s actions related to them are the products of a culture, so both the signs and actions echo a culture’s values, hierarchies, rules, and aesthetics. But though these observations certainly become the topic of intriguing conversations with travelers, one wonders if, in general, the signage of various cultures is especially telling in and of itself, particularly in comparison to richer texts such as consumer goods, handicrafts, fine arts, ceremonial objects, as well as more elaborate written or oral texts such as songs, diaries, speeches, advertisements, histories, novels, and media coverage. The terseness of traffic, commer-
cial, and other material signs seems to limit their ability to do more than suggest a culture, while many other texts possess a greater resonance that can begin to explain it. Geosemiotics may be a useful tool within a researcher’s repertoire, but the observations and hypotheses arising from its use must always be triangulated with other information from other sources—economics, geography, history, the arts.

The book’s quotidian illustrations of how the method may be applied point to this limitation. The final chapter discusses the very different practices natives of Hong Kong and Finland use while crossing the street and recognizing pedestrian traffic signals: the authors explain that a Finn is likely to wait for authorization to cross the street and a Hong Konger is likely to cross as soon as possible without regard for a traffic sign. Of course, at different moments, individuals may select practices that are atypical because of their preoccupations, their companions, or even the weather. Though choices and behaviors may vary, the authors contend that, they generally arise from the “sociocultural expectations, sanctions, enforcements, and transgressions in play.” However, it is not clear how one, when applying geosemiotics, knows if one is observing the cultural rule or the exception to it.

This problem caused this reviewer to wish for additional discussion of the authors’ own research practices. They state that the text is based on an “extensive body of research,” which is described as travel by themselves and their students to China and Hong Kong, Finland, the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Austria, Germany, Brazil, Hungary, Lebanon, and France. Unfortunately, the book does not present appendices that catalog the observations, their dates, durations, and the number of instances of particular behaviors that were observed to warrant generalizations about cultural tendencies. In some cases, the authors refer to other sources that establish standards for signs and their observance, as in the Manual for Uniform Traffic Control Devices published by the U.S. Federal Highway Administration. But the majority of observations are undocumented. Since “research” often implies an approach that can make both validity and reliability claims, it would be helpful to know if the authors intended this meaning or something more casual. In addition, it would be useful to describe the method in such a way as to discourage others’ use of an overly casual approach to the method and the conclusions drawn from it. Given the dawning awareness in the United States of the fallibility of inferring individuals’ intentions by their behavior in single or limited instances or according to their gender, ethnicity, age, or other primary markers, it seems that researchers must be especially
cautious of the possibility of presuming to know the intent and therefore the meaning of others' actions, and they must have social science controls in place in their research to ensure that they are not reading too much into their observations.

Regardless of this issue, the authors' many illustrations convincingly make the case that cultural meaning can be found everywhere. However, these examples do not argue persuasively for the power of their method, which seems a lost opportunity. The texts selected for remark in the book do not seem especially significant, and the addition they make to U.S. readers' understanding of their own or foreign cultures seems trivial. A discussion of Kenneth Burke’s representative anecdote suggests an awareness of this limitation, but the idea is only briefly treated and the authors leave the issue entirely open for individual consideration: “While it might be hard to articulate the representative anecdote—we leave that to our readers—we can say that we see human action arising, largely unconsciously, out of prior experience, habits, and prior actions within the particular places we inhabit.” Had the authors included an analysis of a discourse in place (an investigation of a place, event, or series of signs) that is of obvious import to citizens within a culture or to those observing it, then the advantages of their approach would be more apparent. For example, geosemiotic analyses of the Pentagon or World Trade Center after the 9/11 attacks, Tiananmen Square since the student protests of 1989, or, taking a very recent event, the perimeter of the National Palace in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, during or after President Jean Bertrand Aristide’s loss of power would all speak volumes about the cultures they represent. Even less overtly political events such as a Grateful Dead concert at a typical, for-profit U.S. festival venue would supply memorable and probably surprising findings. Though pedestrian traffic signs and cultural behavior in regard to them may be studied for meaning, it is hard for one to claim that they matter much unless they are endowed with additional levels of significance because of the historical moment or social import of their appearance.

The authors note this limitation in their preface by explaining that “Because of the rather compressed nature of this analysis which covers a very wide range of semiotic systems, we cannot in each case also dwell on the ways in which each of these semiotic systems indexes the sociocultural and sociopolitical structures of power in the world around us.” They argue that developing their analytical system is “of value in and of itself” for researchers. The sad event is that this decision results in a book that is ultimately less satisfying than it might have been because it
seems to dwell so on the surface of cultures and their social issues. A longer discussion of this topic in the last chapter of the book, once a reader has absorbed the workings of geosemiotics, might have helped one to re-contextualize the system and see its promise for future analyses of more intricate "texts." Without full development of this entelechial line of thought, the book strikes this reader as about a considerable amount less that it might have been.