## Critiquing The Divide: A Reassessment of Lagopoulos'
## "Non-Symmetrical Kaleidoscope of Semiotics"

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### *Abstract*

*This article critically responds to Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos' 2025 paper, "The Non-Symmetrical Kaleidoscope of Semiotics." Lagopoulos proposes a strict epistemological divide between Saussurean and Peircean semiotic traditions and critiques several hybrids and applied forms of semiotics, including biosemiotics. While his work articulates the philosophical fault lines in semiotic theory, this critique challenges some of its overgeneralizations, particularly the claim of absolute incompatibility between paradigms and the dismissal of newer subfields as theoretically weak. By examining these claims through contemporary research and interdisciplinary scholarship, this article argues for a more pluralistic and integrative approach to semiotic studies, one that reflects the current evolution of the field across domains such as digital culture, cognitive science, and biological systems.*

**Keywords***: semiotics, Saussure, Peirce, biosemiotics, interdisciplinarity*

## Introduction

The foundational dichotomy between Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce has significantly shaped the evolution of modern semiotics. Saussure, considered the father of structural linguistics, introduced a dyadic model of the sign, comprising the "signifier" and the "signified," which emphasizes synchronic relations and systemic difference (Juan, 2004); (Cooren, 2008). This model highlights how meaning arises not from intrinsic reference but from the differential relations between signs within a system. Language, in this view, is a closed, rule-governed system that can be analyzed synchronically to reveal how meanings are constructed through binary oppositions. Peirce, in contrast, conceptualized signs through a triadic model; representamen, object, and interpretant, framing semiosis as a dynamic, open-ended process grounded in logic, experience, and interpretive interaction (Lanir, 2020; Solomon, 2024). His model introduces categories of signs; icon, index, and symbol, each with distinct semiotic functions, allowing for a more fluid and context-sensitive account of meaning.

In his 2025 article "The Non-Symmetrical Kaleidoscope of Semiotics," Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos contends that the traditions stemming from Saussure and Peirce are epistemologically incompatible. Using a matrix of philosophical oppositions; rationalist versus empiricist, deductive versus inductive, idealist versus materialist, Lagopoulos maps Saussurean and Peircean semiotics onto entirely distinct conceptual poles. He argues that attempts to reconcile these models are theoretically incoherent and intellectually dangerous, as they obscure the deep philosophical rifts between the two traditions. Consequently, Lagopoulos critiques hybrid frameworks that integrate Saussurean and Peircean insights, including biosemiotics, pictorial semiotics, cinematic semiotics, and other interdisciplinary developments. According to Lagopoulos, these approaches compromise the internal consistency and philosophical clarity of semiotic theory.

While Lagopoulos's analysis provides a historically grounded and philosophically ambitious perspective, it risks essentializing complex theoretical lineages and underestimating the pragmatic evolution of the field. Saussure's linguistic model, while foundational, has been continually reinterpreted and expanded by thinkers like Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Greimas, who applied structuralist principles to non-linguistic systems including myth, fashion, narrative, and kinship (Mandal, 2021; Balari & Lorenzo, 2018). Similarly, Peirce's model, once seen as marginal in Europe, gained traction through the work of Sebeok, Eco, and Deely, whose contributions emphasized the flexibility of Peirce's ideas in contexts ranging from ethology to cybernetics.

Importantly, many scholars have found productive ways to navigate the supposed divide. Eco, for example, viewed semiotics as an "open field," arguing that no single model can account for the complexity of communication across diverse media and cultural systems (Eco, 1984). His semiotic theory pragmatically draws from both traditions, incorporating Saussurean codes and Peircean interpretants to analyze texts, images, and cultural practices. Similarly, in applied fields such as media studies, translation, and education, hybrid models have enabled more comprehensive approaches to meaning-making. Bateman (2018) and Lagopoulos & Boklund-Lagopoulou (2020) show how combining structural and processual perspectives can clarify multimodal and intercultural communication. These integrations do not dilute theoretical rigor; rather, they expand semiotic relevance and adaptability. Thus, this critique challenges Lagopoulos's epistemological rigidity and instead advocates for a pluralistic semiotic framework responsive to the interpretive demands of a complex, globalized world.

**Theoretical Review**

Lagopoulos' epistemological classification revives longstanding philosophical dichotomies but risks oversimplifying the diversity within both traditions. While Saussure's model was initially focused on language, structuralists like Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Greimas rapidly extended it to non-linguistic systems (Balari & Lorenzo, 2018; Turner, 2017; Mandal, 2021). These scholars sought analytical universality of developing transferable tools for myth, narrative, and kinship systems, without rigid allegiance to Saussure's epistemology. Rather than isolating semiotics as a linguistic subfield, structuralists adapted the Saussurean notion of difference into broader cultural, visual, and symbolic analyses. This trajectory of development suggests that Saussurean thought, far from being epistemologically closed, lent itself to evolution and synthesis. The utility of the structural model in film, art, advertising, and education further underscores its adaptability.

Peirce's contributions, initially sidelined in European circles, experienced a resurgence through the work of Sebeok, Eco, and Deely. No longer confined to metaphysical abstraction, Peirce's triadic semiosis has informed disciplines ranging from communication theory and philosophy of science to artificial intelligence and neuroscience. Eco (1984) recognized the friction between structuralist and Peircean frameworks but viewed this as generative rather than destructive. He emphasized that semiotics must function as an "open field," where competing models coexist to address the complexities of meaning-making. This pragmatic and flexible orientation has enabled Peircean theory to inform studies in user-interface design, affective computing, and even marketing; realms where interpretants, context, and feedback loops are vital. Such integrations reflect not a breakdown of coherence but a responsive semiotic sensibility that values relevance over rigidity.

Lagopoulos also critiques synthetic models like Hjelmslev's glossematics and Greimas' semiotic square, viewing them as epistemological compromises. Yet these frameworks have been foundational in disciplines like discourse analysis, translation studies, and visual communication, precisely because they bridge structure with interpretation. Greimasian semiotics, for example, is employed in narrative media to explore binary oppositions and actantial roles, while also accommodating shifts in meaning over time and context (Zanettin,

2021). Hjelmslev's model, though abstract, enables the analysis of meaning across linguistic and non-linguistic levels, influencing semiotic approaches to typography, branding, and digital design. Moreover, these hybrid models prove especially effective in navigating intercultural semiosis and multimodal texts, where meaning emerges through intersecting codes and evolving conventions. In this light, the epistemological "purity" Lagopoulos demands may offer theoretical clarity, but at the cost of explanatory range. Contemporary semiotics, as shown in the works of Danish and Batool (2019), thrives not on strict lineage but on adaptability; responding to the plural, digital, and global nature of modern sign systems

**Findings and Discussion**

Contemporary semiotics frequently incorporates interdisciplinary borrowing and methodological flexibility, which is particularly evident in applied fields. In biosemiotics, scholars like Barbieri and Hoffmeyer apply Peircean semiosis to molecular and cellular communication, while also adopting structuralist models to describe biological codes and differentiation (Queiroz et al., 2018; Vega, 2018; Barbieri, 2018). These scholars view semiotics as crucial for understanding life processes, including "signals," "codes," and "information processing" in biosystems (Queiroz et al., 2018). The notion of "code duality"—that life processes involve both material and semiotic dimensions embodies precisely the kind of hybrid thinking Lagopoulos rejects. Indeed, the existence of organic codes in living systems implies the necessity of incorporating the concept of meaning in biology, as codes and meaning are intrinsically linked (Barbieri, 2018).

Furthermore, biosemiotics challenges the boundary between the natural sciences and the humanities by introducing a framework in which meaning is not restricted to human language or culture. Hoffmeyer (2008) argues that the evolution of life itself can be understood as a semiotic process, wherein organisms continuously interpret environmental cues, adapt behaviorally, and communicate through biochemical signals. This approach draws from Peirce's emphasis on interpretants and semiosis while simultaneously borrowing the Saussurean insight that meaning arises through systems of differentiation. In doing so, biosemiotics extends the scope of semiotic inquiry into areas like developmental biology, neuroscience, and ecological modeling, areas that traditional semiotics would have treated as external. Thus, rather than representing a theoretical dilution, the interdisciplinary nature of biosemiotics demonstrates how hybrid frameworks can deepen our understanding of meaning, function, and communication in both human and non-human contexts. These developments suggest that contemporary semiotics gains strength not from purity but from its capacity to evolve alongside the complexity of its objects of study.

Film analysis often integrates syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures with indexical and iconic readings. Visual metaphors and symbols are examined not only for their formal, structural roles but also for their cultural and ideological meanings (Danish & Batool, 2019). A single cinematic image may simultaneously function within a syntactic chain of shots (Saussurean structure) and evoke broader cultural codes and interpretants (Peircean logic). According to Eco, meaning is not inherent in the text alone but emerges through a collaborative process between the text and the interpretive frameworks brought by audiences. Viewers decode signs by mobilizing both their cognitive repertoires and sociocultural knowledge, generating multiple layers of interpretation (Eco, 1984; Danish & Batool, 2019). This interplay of encoded and inferred meaning becomes especially evident in genres such as allegory, satire, or experimental cinema, where visual signs rely on shared conventions but also elicit subjective and affective responses. Moreover, multimodal semiotics reveals how audio-visual elements (e.g., soundtracks, editing, color palettes) co-construct meaning through diverse sign processes. Thus, media texts; especially in film and digital communication, serve as fertile ground for the hybrid application of Saussurean structures and Peircean semiosis, offering a dynamic space where structural relations and interpretative openness coalesce.

Legal Semiotics: Goodrich and Jackson have shown how legal language operates both as a formal system and as a performative, interpretive practice. Legal semiotics provides a lens through which the construction and interpretation of laws, legal procedures, and judicial decisions can be critically examined. Hybrid models, incorporating both Saussurean and Peircean perspectives, offer the necessary tools to analyze how law signifies beyond literal codes (Pirker & Smolka, 2020; Wagner & Matulewska, 2020; Durant, 2017). Saussure's structuralist approach helps in dissecting the formal elements of legal language, such as syntax and terminology, revealing the underlying system that governs legal discourse. This is crucial for understanding how laws are systematically organized and how different legal concepts relate to one another (Bor & Könczöl, 2019; Glogar, 2023). By analyzing legal texts as structured systems, scholars can uncover the internal logic and coherence of legal frameworks.

However, legal texts do not exist in a vacuum; their interpretation is inherently contextual and influenced by cultural, institutional, and historical factors. This is where Peirce's triadic model becomes especially relevant. Peirce's focus on interpretants; how meaning is received and developed, allows for a more dynamic understanding of how laws are applied, negotiated, and even contested. Legal decisions are not only about decoding statutes but also involve the interpretation of precedent, societal values, and implicit norms. In this sense, law functions simultaneously as a symbolic system (in Saussurean terms) and as an interpretive process mediated by signs (in Peircean terms). Peircean semiotics helps explain how legal meaning evolves through judicial reasoning, dissent, and adaptation to changing societal contexts.

Moreover, legal semiotics has practical applications in comparative law, translation of legal documents, and courtroom communication. For instance, Wagner and Matulewska (2020) explore how semiotic frameworks assist in understanding how legal concepts shift across jurisdictions and languages. Such work demonstrates that strict adherence to a single semiotic model may not be adequate for analyzing the fluid and polysemic nature of legal systems. The hybridization of Saussurean and Peircean perspectives thus enriches legal scholarship by accounting for both formal structure and contextual flexibility. In this way, legal semiotics exemplifies the strengths of interdisciplinary semiotic hybridity and challenges the rigidity proposed by Lagopoulos.

Conversely, Peirce's semiotics brings attention to the interpretive and contextual aspects of legal communication. His triadic model helps in analyzing how legal signs (e.g., a judge's ruling, a contract) are interpreted in different contexts, taking into account the object they represent and the interpretant (the understanding or effect produced in the mind of the interpreter).(Verenich, 2017) (Peno & Bogucki, 2020) This is particularly important in legal settings, where the interpretation of laws can vary significantly depending on cultural, social, and individual perspectives. Hybrid models also facilitate the study of legal rhetoric and argumentation. By combining structural analysis with interpretive flexibility, scholars can uncover how legal texts are designed to persuade, legitimize power, and shape social norms. Such analyses reveal the ways in which legal language extends beyond its denotative function, operating as a tool for constructing and reinforcing specific ideologies. Peirce's notion of infinite semiosis aligns with poststructuralist concerns about polysemy and interpretive instability, while Saussure's emphasis on structure supports systematic analysis; combining both enables scholars to capture the dynamism of meaning without losing analytical coherence.

Hybridization is not only possible but often necessary. In digital environments, meaning is constructed through a complex interplay between text, image, audio, and interface. For example, a button on a screen may simultaneously function as a symbol, an icon, and an index (Семенюк & Gordienko, 2018). Analyzing it through both Peircean and Saussurean lenses allows for a more comprehensive understanding of user interaction. Furthermore, the shift toward multimodal literacy in education supports the value of integrative semiotic models. Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar builds on Saussurean insights but incorporates Peircean typologies to address how learners interpret spatial arrangements, gestures, and

audiovisual cues. Teachers who understand both systems are better equipped to guide students in analyzing complex texts, from political memes to infographics.

In literary theory, Culler and Lotman have shown how cultural texts function as both structured systems and open networks of meaning. Narrative structures often depend on syntactic ordering, but interpretation is shaped by cultural indexing, genre conventions, and symbolic inference. These examples demonstrate that semiotic practice already transcends the divide Lagopoulos insists upon. Far from undermining theoretical integrity, hybridity enables scholars to adapt their tools to the complexity of contemporary sign systems. Instrumentalizing law involves the cognitive system in detecting, analyzing, modifying, and transferring signs from one socially constituted sign-system to another (Wagner & Matulewska, 2020).

## Relevance to Language and Education Studies

The theoretical positions advanced by Lagopoulos carry significant implications for educational theory and language pedagogy. If taken at face value, his claim that Saussurean and Peircean semiotics are epistemologically incompatible would discourage educators from drawing upon hybrid models in the classroom (Otte et al., 2020). However, modern language education is increasingly multimodal, interdisciplinary, and contextual; thus, semiotic flexibility becomes crucial for understanding how learners interpret not just verbal texts but also images, gestures, sounds, and digital interfaces. Saussure's structuralist model remains useful in teaching linguistic fundamentals such as syntax, phonology, and the relational structure of language systems. It helps students identify patterns and contrasts in meaning; skills essential for reading comprehension and grammar instruction. In contrast, Peirce's semiotics enhances students' interpretive awareness (Eskola, 2021). His notion of the interpretant encourages educators to support multiple readings of a text, recognizing that meaning arises through dynamic interaction, prior knowledge, and cultural framing.

In literacy development, this dual perspective is particularly helpful. For instance, analyzing a political cartoon may involve identifying structural codes using Saussurean tools, while also unpacking emotional cues and social indexicality with Peircean categories (Brown & Alford, 2023) (Lim, 2018). Such activities foster critical thinking and media literacy. Moreover, semiotic hybridity aligns well with constructivist pedagogy, which views learners as active meaning-makers. In second language acquisition, for example, educators often emphasize pragmatic and contextual factors; areas where Peircean models of inference and sign evolution are extremely relevant. At the same time, formal instruction grounded in Saussurean concepts provides learners with stable reference points in the new linguistic system. Rejecting hybrid models on epistemological grounds would isolate education from these evolving practices and prevent educators from adopting analytical approaches that have proven effective in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Embracing both traditions enables a richer, more adaptive pedagogy that reflects the communicative realities students face beyond the classroom. Modern communication extends beyond traditional language-focused curricula (Lim, 2018; Sherwani, 2021)

## Relevance to Language and Education Studies

This article argues that the semiotic landscape is too dynamic, interconnected, and interdisciplinary to be reduced to binary oppositions. While Lagopoulos' philosophical mapping is thoughtful and precise, its application risks excluding a wide range of contemporary semiotic practices. By adhering to strict epistemological boundaries, he overlooks the reality that semiotic scholarship has already evolved beyond the Saussure–Peirce split through creative syntheses, applied innovation, and cross-disciplinary dialogue. The integration of both frameworks offers significant analytical benefits: Saussure's model provides system-level clarity, while Peirce's model offers processual richness. When scholars and educators combine

these frameworks, they gain a fuller picture of how meaning operates across domains; whether in biological systems, legal discourse, visual culture, or the classroom (Strand, 2021).

Moreover, semiotic hybridity reflects the actual practices of meaning-making in a world characterized by technological mediation, cultural pluralism, and increasingly complex forms of communication. The merging of linguistic, visual, and computational codes in digital media, for example, often demands an approach that draws from both traditions to adequately explain how meaning is encoded, circulated, and interpreted. In such contexts, Peirce's attention to interpretants and inferential logic complements Saussure's analysis of structural relations and signifiers. The critique of Lagopoulos is not a rejection of systematization but a call for openness. A semiotic framework that accommodates multiple perspectives is not theoretically incoherent; rather, it reflects the context-dependent, evolving, and multifaceted nature of signs. Semiotics must remain responsive to the world it seeks to interpret, a world that is increasingly hybrid, mediated, and transdisciplinary. A semiotic lens applied to Large Language Models reveals that their functionality is rooted in the manipulation and generation of signs, challenging purely cognitivist interpretations and reinforcing the need for hybrid analytical models (Picca, 2025).

## Conclusion

Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos' "The Non-Symmetrical Kaleidoscope of Semiotics" offers an ambitious and rigorous classification of semiotic traditions. His insistence on philosophical consistency is intellectually valuable, as it compels readers to confront the assumptions underlying their methods. However, this article has shown that his argument for epistemological exclusivity is overly rigid when applied to the complexities of contemporary semiotic research and practice. By critically examining his distinctions and reviewing a range of interdisciplinary applications, this article demonstrates that Saussurean and Peircean semiotics are not inherently incompatible; in fact, their interaction often produces more nuanced and effective tools for analysis. The growth of hybrid subfields such as biosemiotics, cognitive semiotics, and educational semiotics, signals a healthy diversification of the discipline, rather than a dilution of its intellectual rigor. Rather than preserving fixed paradigms, semiotics should remain an adaptive and inclusive inquiry into the nature of meaning. The field's strength lies in its capacity to evolve and integrate theoretical insights from diverse sources. In this light, the kaleidoscope of semiotics need not be asymmetrical: it can be understood as a dynamic constellation where differences are not barriers, but sources of illumination.

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