Biosemiotic Achievement Award for the Year 2020

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Abstract

The Annual Biosemiotic Achievement Award was established at the annual meeting of the International Society for Biosemiotic Studies (ISBS) in 2014, in conjunction with Springer and *Biosemiotics*. It seeks to recognize papers published in the journal that present novel and potentially important contributions to biosemiotic research, its scientific impact and its future prospects. Here the winner of the Biosemiotic Achievement Award for 2020 is announced: The award goes to Filip Jaroš and Matěj Pudil for the article “Cognitive systems of human and non-human animals: At the crossroads of phenomenology, ethology and biosemiotics”.

Keywords Biosemiotic achievement award · Cognition · Ethology · Phenomenology · Zoosemiotics

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Candidates for the Biosemiotic Achievement Award are judged on

- 1) novelty in terms of theoretical or empirical discovery (i.e., enhanced description and explanation of existing and/or discovery of new empirical phenomena),

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- 2) relevance of new findings to the concepts or models of biosemiotics, and
- 3) rigour of investigation.

The award winner is awarded a book voucher from Springer worth EUR 250, and an electronic subscription to *Biosemiotics* for one year.

The 2020 Award Winner

We are pleased to announce that the Biosemiotic Achievement Award for 2020 goes to Filip Jaroš and Matěj Pudil for their article “Cognitive systems of human and non-human animals: At the crossroads of phenomenology, ethology and biosemiotics”. The article was published in *Biosemiotics* volume 13, issue 2 (August 2020), pages 155–177.

Jaroš and Pudil are both affiliated with Department of philosophy and social sciences at the University of Hradec Králové in the Czech Republic, where Jaroš is an assistant professor, and Pudil is a doctoral student.

The article seeks to provide “a general framework for assessing and categorizing the cognitive systems of human and non-human animals” (p. 155), and introduces a concentric model of human and non-human cognition (p. 162–170, see also the article’s Fig. 1, p. 16). The model development builds on Thomas Sebeok’s understanding of modelling systems and their relevance within semiotics. The concentric model of cognition presented by Jaroš and Pudil involves three intertwined spheres, namely corporeality, social communication and culture. As Fig. 1 (p. 164) indicates, corporeality may in relative terms typically take up more space, as it were, in the lives of non-human animals compared to social communication and culture, while the latter two spheres play a bigger role for humans. The basic premise of the model is nevertheless that these three spheres are relevant and can be studied across species, involving both humans and non-humans. This opens cultural studies up for a wider approach than one that is restricted to humans only. The authors’ approach is in line with a pluralistic perspective “that views the communication and cognition of humans as distinct [from], but not superior to those of non-human animals” (p. 155).

The cross-species studies that the article calls for and contributes to are realigned with several contemporary agendas for integrating studies of human and non-human phenomena (including One Health, One Welfare, Planetary Health, and comparative psychology). With regard to the implications such theoretical perspectives can have for the way we value humans vs. non-humans, some may worry that likening human phenomena to non-human ones might lessen our esteem for humans. However, the political philosopher Will Kymlicka (2018), a prominent advocate for marginalized humans and animals alike, has suggested that human rights should be given a non-anthropocentric foundation, drawing on what we have in common with animals (such as embodied subjectivity and corporeal vulnerability), rather than what distinguishes us from them. This, he believes, would protect human dignity and rights in the best manner possible without giving cause to or justification for harming animals, as is often the real-life consequence of founding human rights on ideas of human exceptionalism and supremacism. In such a perspective, acknowledging that not only humans, but several animals, too, live their lives embedded in corporeal, cultural and

communicative spheres may serve to increase our sensitivity and moral regard for others whether they are humans or non-humans.

Jaroš and Pudil's paper also highlights an important distinction between modes of analysis in zoosemiotics, demarcating two specific trends represented by the traditional Tartu-Sebeok view and the more "liberal" approach that draws on contemporary science and ethical concerns mentioned above. The limitations of the former have to do with the place of culture as a uniquely human superstructure built on linguistic sign systems (p. 162). This is a direct consequence of Lotmanian thought on the way modelling systems are configured hierarchically (Lotman 2011: 250). Taking a clear position, Jaroš and Pudil believe in the communicational primacy of language against the modelling function assigned to language by Sebeok (1991). This leads to a reformulation of what it means for something to be properly zoosemiotic, in the form of "a liberal updating of Sebeok's original approach" (p. 156). In contrast to the *prelinguistic* view of zoosemiotic categories of sign activity they assign to Sebeok's theory, the concentric model they formulate is intended to eliminate a persistent cognitive bias towards an anthropocentric categorization of experience and interaction.

Expanding biosemiotic thought in strides, "Cognitive systems..." is an excellent display of theory in itself, but it also provides a reflection of general zoosemiotic theory as it currently stands. By being clear about the divisions already in place within different perspectives in zoosemiotics, Jaroš and Pudil contribute to the discussion about what can be endorsed in terms of the semiotic interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic species, and whether a logocentric differentiation is productive enough to be workable in how we deal with interspecies interaction. The pluralism advocated by the paper is reflected in the authors' attempt to avoid a human-animal continuum. This is replaced by a case of specificity in species (a view previously developed by Jaroš and Maran, 2019), which is in turn applied directly to the development of the model and its usage in case studies. The applicability of the model in studies of actual phenomena is crucial for its potential in promoting the further development of zoosemiotics, and this is also one of the reasons why this paper stands out: It sets out to develop a timely model and test it against specific cases where we gain new information from a practical standpoint, while keeping in line with the ethical standpoint of the authors.

We believe that this paper will provide the ground for further discussion and improvement of zoosemiotic theory, especially with regard to its pragmatic dimension and ethical assumptions and implications of zoosemiotics as an integral part of the current practice of biosemiotics. With this in mind, it is a pleasure for us to award the 2020 Biosemiotic Achievement Award to Jaroš and Pudil's article.

The members of the 2020 Biosemiotic Achievement Award selection panel.

Claudio Julio Rodríguez Higuera.

Morten Tønnessen.

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