

Meta-

A prefix (from Greek μετὰ in the sense of 'after,' 'in consideration of,' 'pre-,' 'trans-'), the meta- of *metaphysics* has its origin in the bibliographical classification of *Aristotle's work of that title, coming *after* the works concerning natural science (*physica*). It acquired its primary meaning through Alexander of Aphrodisias: πρὸς ἡμᾶς ('for us') metaphysics comes after natural science, although, as knowledge from first principles, logically it should precede it.

The prefix *meta-* normally precedes the name of a discipline if it is a question of the terminology or principles of that discipline, or if — more rarely — aspects transcending the discipline are being discussed. For semiotics, the terms of special relevance are: **metalanguage* and *metaterm*; *metasemiotics* and *metasign*, and *metaethics*, **metalogic*, and *metascience*.

Metalinguage and Metaterm

The constitution of a metalanguage serves a double purpose; first, it serves to avoid the antinomies of logic, and second, it makes possible an exact *semantics of (e.g., formalized) *languages. From the first point of view, *metalanguage* has a long history. Already Sextus Empiricus made the distinction between different levels of language in order to eliminate sophisms. Later, *Porphyry introduced the distinction between *prote thesis* and *deutera thesis*, the latter describing the syntactical functions of words. *Augustine differentiates between *nomen rei* ‘*name of thing’ and *nomen nominis* ‘name of name’. In scholastic philosophy, the distinction is made in the same sense between *intentio prima* ‘first intention’ and *intentio secunda* ‘second intention,’ which includes metaterms such as *terminus*, *universale*, *propositio*, *genus*, etc. Buridanus explicitly uses this doctrine of intentions to dissolve logical antinomies.

In modern times, the term *metalanguage* originated in *Leśniewski (Tarski 1935:1–8; Luschei 1962:34f.), but, at least implicitly, *Frege had already anticipated this distinction by differentiating between “auxiliary language” and “language of explanation,” in which thoughts are developed concerning the referential function of auxiliary language (Frege 1962b:1, 4, 1969:180). In Carnap (1934a), metalanguage is so conceived that it includes all expressions referring to all elements of object-language, i.e., object-signs, qualities, and connections of expressions and the rules of their definition and substitution.

Metasemiotics and Metasign

As distinct from semiotics, which describes object-signs with regard to their semiotic character, metasemiotics refers to the notion of signs as signs. This may be done in a scientific-theoretical way or in a practical-communicative way. In the case of the latter, *Hjelmslev regards metasemiotics as being an explicitly connotative language, i.e., its level of *expression is itself a language consisting of a level of expression and a level of *meaning (cf. for example, styles, *code variations, dialects and *idiolects). Scientific metasemiotics describes the notion of “sign”; it consists of metasigns (Nattiez 1979b: 389–99).

These types of metasemiotics are presented, without necessarily being explicitly named as such, at the beginning of most semiological treatises, in an attempt to define the term “sign.” For that purpose there are very different approaches, the most important of them being the *semiotics* of *Peirce and *Morris and *sémiologie*, from the *German Enlightenment to *Saussure. The first position bases the concept of a sign on the concept of interpretant, while the second originates from the correlation of two structures determining the position (*valeur*) of *signifier and signified. In the first case, metasemiotics has to elucidate the notion of rules before the concept of sign can be defined. In the second case, the notion of the “sign system” must be clarified before one can recognize what a sign is. In the first case, metasemiotics describes the genesis and validity of norms for the use of signs; in the second case it describes structures the elements of which are signs. These two paradigms can hardly be unified unless one wants to commit the naturalistic fallacy (Hubig 1980: 217 f.)

Metaethics, Metalogic, and Metascience

Metaethics is, according to Hare (1952: iii), the logical study of the language of morals. Nowell-Smith considers its function to be descriptive (1969: 181) and explanatory of the way moral terms are used. Metaethics is descriptive and neutral (Ayer in Nowell-Smith 1969: 19 ff.), including all ethics, or forming only an epistemological approach to ethics (Brand 1959). *Metalogic* means the theory of the *syntax and semantics of formal languages and systems (cf., e.g., the results of *model theory of Gödel: Wang 1974; 166–80). *Metascience* describes the practice of research in the different sciences (Radnitzky³1973: xiii f., lf.; Hubig 1978: 32 ff.) C.H.