

The Operative Field: A Map of Disciplines That Study Signs That Act (EA-OPSEM-FIELDMAP-01 v1.0)

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Abstract

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Body

The Operative Field

A Map of Disciplines That Study Signs That Act

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Thesis

Multiple disciplines independently study signs that act — signs that modify the systems in which they circulate rather than merely representing states of affairs. These fields share a structural concern but lack a common vocabulary for comparing the mechanisms, substrates, targets, costs, and effects of semiotic action. Operative semiotics provides this vocabulary.

This paper does not claim that the mapped fields are subsets of operative semiotics. It claims that operative semiotics provides a common comparative framework for the phenomenon they share: the sign that intervenes.

The Map

Each entry identifies: the operative object (what acts), the substrate (where it acts), the target (what is modified), the mechanism (how), and the commons question (whether the action enriches or depletes shared meaning — the variable that operative semiotics adds to each field).

Performative Utterance and Speech Act Theory

Austin and Searle established that utterances can be performative — “I promise,” “I name this ship.” Operative object: the illocutionary act. Substrate: social convention. Target: institutional reality. Mechanism: conventional force. Commons question: not generally formalized in these terms.

Peircean Dynamic Semiosis

Peirce’s triad (Object → Sign → Interpretant) treats semiosis as continuous sign action. Operative object: the sign in motion. Substrate: interpretive community. Target: the interpretant. Mechanism: abduction, induction, habit formation. Commons question: implicit (community of inquirers) but not formalized.

Document Theory

Suzanne Briet, Michael Buckland: “a document is evidence in support of a fact.” The antelope in the zoo is a document. Operative object: the indexed object. Substrate: institutional classification. Target: knowledge organization. Mechanism: registration, cataloguing, retrieval. Commons question: asked by critiques of colonial and institutional classification but not formalized.

Rhetoric, Propaganda, and Strategic Communication

Signs designed to persuade, mobilize, or deceive. Operative object: the persuasive message. Substrate: public discourse. Target: audience belief and behavior. Mechanism: framing, repetition, emotional appeal, flooding. Commons question: central — propaganda may deplete the shared meaning-pool; rhetoric occupies a spectrum.

Platform Studies and Operational Media

Platforms as sign-processing systems that shape what signs can do. Operative object: the platform affordance. Substrate: digital infrastructure. Target: user behavior, attention markets. Mechanism: algorithmic ranking, feed design, moderation. Commons question: central — platform extraction is classified within operative semiotics as predatory compression.

Metadata and Knowledge-Graph Engineering

Schema.org, Wikidata, FAIR data: signs designed to organize retrieval. Operative object: the metadata field. Substrate: knowledge graph. Target: entity identity, discoverability. Mechanism: structured annotation, typed relations. Commons question: asked by FAIR infrastructure but not connected to compression economics.

Prompt Engineering and Adversarial Machine Communication

Signs designed to modify language model behavior. Operative object: the prompt. Substrate: inference-time computation. Target: model output. Mechanism: in-context learning, instruction following, jailbreaking. Commons question: not generally formalized — operative semiotics classifies adversarial prompt manipulation as a form of predatory compression.

Training-Layer Literature

Human-composed writing for machine reception across training, indexing, embedding, retrieval, composition, and agentic layers. Operative object: the training-layer document. Substrate: the training corpus. Target: the model’s knowledge and behavior. Mechanism: anticipatory address, semantic density, structural persistence. Commons question: central — TLL asks whether composition enriches or depletes the commons.

Computational Law and Smart Contracts

Code as operative legal text. Operative object: the executable contract. Substrate: blockchain or legal system. Target: rights, obligations, transactions. Mechanism: automated enforcement. Commons question: asked by critiques of algorithmic governance.

Operative Philology

The tradition that treats texts as active agents in intellectual history — not merely records of past thought but interventions that reshape what can be thought. Operative object: the transmitted text. Substrate: philological tradition. Target: future reading. Mechanism: editorial decision, transmission, commentary. Commons question: implicit — who has access to the transmitted text?

The Inclusion Test

A field belongs in the operative map if its central object satisfies:- The sign acts. It modifies the system it enters, rather than merely representing.- The action has a substrate. The sign acts in or on a specific material, institutional, or computational system.- The action has a cost. Composition, transmission, or reception of the sign requires labor, attention, or computational resources.

Fields that study signs as static representations (formal semantics, model-theoretic semantics, truth-conditional semantics) are outside the operative map. Pearson’s TOS, which studies the formal structure of operators within sign processes but does not ask what those operations cost or produce in the world, is an adjacent predecessor, not a member.

What Operative Semiotics Adds

Each mapped field asks some version of “what does this sign do?” Operative semiotics adds the variables that none of them systematically asks:- Fuel source (C_b): what is burned to perform the semiotic operation?- Ledger structure (L): is the cost internalized or externalized?- Commons effect (-C): does the operation enrich or deplete shared meaning?- Provenance chain: is the sign’s origin preserved or erased in transmission?- Compression regime: is this a Lossy, Predatory, or Witness operation?

These variables are orthogonal to each field’s internal concerns but decisive for understanding what semiotic action *does to the world*.

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