

## PHILOSOPHY

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### MAIN PRINCIPLES (CONCEPTS, METHODS) OF RONALD STAMPER'S ORGANIZATIONAL SEMIOTICS

**Abstract.** The purpose of the work is a detailed analysis of "organizational semiotics" by Ronald Stamper. The behavioral approach, in which it is embodied, is currently considered one of the most effective modern methods of studying, analyzing and designing organizations of various types.

In accordance with the set goal, the main attention in the work was focused on revealing the content of the main concepts of organizational semiotics, identifying logical relationships between them, and considering methodological principles. Analytical and comparative methods were used as the main methodological strategies in the work. The first of the declared methods was used in the process of defining the main concepts and methodological arsenal of organizational semiotics. The second as a tool for their comparative comparison and disclosure of semantic relationships between them.

It is demonstrated that in the realities of the information society, Ronald Stamper's "organizational semiotics" is a new interdisciplinary method of studying and designing organizations. Within this approach, the organization is understood as a necessary component of the modern infosphere, as a complex information structure created by communicative processes, objects and services. Both global and local reasons for the appearance of this approach, as well as its varieties, are established.

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It was found that one of the most effective methodological variants of Ronald Stamper's "organizational semiotics" is the so-called Behavioral approach. Its conceptual basis, which consists of the concepts of "information field", "affordance", "semiotic ladder" and "Umwelt", is analyzed. The close semantic interrelationships between the specified concepts have been demonstrated. It is shown that with the help of these concepts, the functioning of the organization is understood as a special semiotic space constituted by various behavioral patterns and social norms. Relying on them, social agents are able to perform communicative actions, create or change knowledge, adhere to or deviate from formal and informal norms of joint existence. The main methodologies of the behavioral approach (semantic and normative) are analyzed and the main phases of their deployment are revealed.

**Keywords:** "organizational semiotics", information society, behavioral approach, organization theory, management, modeling.

**Introduction.** One of the most important tasks of modern management theory is to reveal the peculiarities of organizational functioning in developed societies' current post-industrial stage of existence. It is evident that the emergence of modern information technologies, new software, and the rapid growth of information has significantly transformed not only the economy or society as a whole but also our perception of the world and ourselves (Floridi, 2011).

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** Solving this type of problem requires new methods and approaches. One such approach is Organizational Semiotics, which emerged in the early 1970<sup>s</sup> (Stamper) and developed its most productive capabilities in the late 1990<sup>s</sup> and early 2000<sup>s</sup>. Various theoretical reviews have since been published (Jorna, 2009; Gazendam, 2004).

These include Montreal-2002, Dubrovnik-2009, Barcelona-2012, Delft-2002, and Reading-2003 (Pietarinen, 2010), (Stamper, 2001), and various conferences and workshops which have contributed to the development of the new methodology. Additionally, there has been a significant increase in practical works that directly apply the new methodology, such as those by Senyo (2016, 2018), Rambo (2011), Charel and Gallareta (2007), and Liu (2000).

**The purpose of the article.** The primary objectives of our work are to uncover the meaning of fundamental concepts, establish logical connections between them, and analyze the primary research methodologies of behavior-oriented approaches – one of the most effective approaches in organizational semiotics. Similar to other forms of organizational semiotics, this variant is interdisciplinary at the theoretical and conceptual level. Even a preliminary analysis shows that "organizational semiotics" draws on components from philosophy, semiotics, cognitive psychology, and sociology, economics, and management theory and computer science. This complexity makes it challenging to understand and apply in practical research.

**Formulation of the main material.**

*Organizational semiotics: definition, emergence reasons, and directions.*

According to the definition, organizational semiotics seeks to understand organizations (firms, institutions, and companies) in terms of the use and interpretation of all types of sign systems, sign artifacts, and communication, using scientific disciplines such as cognitive psychology, sociology, economics, management studies, computer science, and information systems (Jorna, 2009, p. 311).

This definition provides three important components for understanding the new approach. Firstly, it indicates a broad scope of application, potentially covering all existing organizations. Secondly, it highlights the main basic terms of the approach as signs and sign systems. Thirdly, it suggests that the approach is applicable to a wide range of contexts. The last section of the definition highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the approach and its reliance on multiple disciplines.

The emergence of organizational semiotics was influenced by various factors, which can be divided into two groups: global and local. Global factors include the information revolution and the reassessment of the role of information in the modern world, as well as the rapid development of new software and the challenges that have arisen from its implementation and use.

The very emergence of organizational semiotics was caused by factors of various kinds. With a certain degree of conventionality, they can be divided into two groups: global and local. The former includes the information revolution and the reassessment of the role of information in the modern world, the emergence and rapid development of new software and all the problems that have arisen as a result of its implementation and use.

Among the factors of local nature, we can single out the following:

a) The inability of other approaches to analyze the peculiarities of information functioning within an organization. Quite often, the focus is primarily on the introduction of new software, ignoring the problems of its interaction with users. According to K. Liu, one of the important consequences of this disproportion is the low economic return of IT in various organizations, especially commercial ones (Liu, 2000, pp. 2-6);

b) The methods related to software development used in the study and modeling of information systems lack scientific substantiation. These methods cannot be considered acceptable for solving many problems caused by the rapid growth of global communications and their impact on business, management, economy, and politics.

However, it is possible to solve such problems with the help of semiotics. Semiotics is the science of sign systems that can provide the necessary level of detail for studying, modeling, and designing organizational and technical systems. It can also establish relationships within binary oppositions such as individual-social, human-technology, and interrelationships that occur within or between organizations. Organizational semiotics is an approach that considers any organization as a complex social semiotic information system. It comprises software and communication relationships that arise in different directions.

Three types of organizational semiotics can be distinguished on the basis of what constitutes the (*elementary unit of communication*) of the object under study. The initial approach acknowledges the "text" as the fundamental unit of analysis in *text-based semiotics*. This direction is based on the analysis of various texts, with the aim of understanding their function and establishing inter-textual relationships. The first variant of "orgsemiotics" allows for the active involvement of the discourse analysis method in its research tools. This approach focuses on the effects of speech in the social dimension, including knowledge production, creation and maintenance of identities, power relations, and ideologies (Mills, 1997). The language used is clear, objective, and value-

neutral, with a formal register and precise word choice. The text adheres to conventional structure and formatting features, including consistent citation and footnote style. The logical structure ensures a clear and concise flow of information with causal connections between statements. The text is free from grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, and punctuation errors. No changes in content have been made.

Representatives of the second option recognize the "sign" as a unit in *sign-based semiotics*. The main focus is on either the relationship between the sign and the object (sign semantics) or the relationship between the sign and human cognitive activity (the pragmatic dimension of the sign). The latter area actively involves and utilizes the findings of cognitive psychology and biology.

Finally, representatives of the third option recognize the "meme" as the primary communicative unit in *meme-based semiotics*. The main focus is on the processes of transmission and selection of these memes. Research efforts in this area of organizational semiotics aim to study the dynamics of the population of memes and their carriers, as well as the mechanisms of transmission and selection (Gazendam). The term "meme" refers to cultural units that are fixed in a certain symbolic form and serve to consolidate and transmit socially significant information.

**Table 1**

Classification of approaches to organizational semiotics

Classification of organizational semiotics	The basic communicative unit	Subject of study
1. Semiotics of the Text	Text	Identification of texts; analysis of texts functioning within the organization; Studying discourse; establishing intertextual relationships
2. Sign Semiotics	Sign	The problem of meaning (semantics). The study of the pragmatic dimension of the sign
3. The Semiotics of the "Meme"	Meme	The role of memes in the information and communication space of an organization

*Source: built by the authors*

However, it is also possible to classify approaches based on the changes that occur within organizations. This has led to the identification of three variants of organizational semiotics: the system-oriented approach, the behavior-oriented approach, and the knowledge-oriented approach. The most extensively developed of these approaches is the behavior-oriented approach, which is closely linked to the founder of organizational semiotics, R. Stamper.

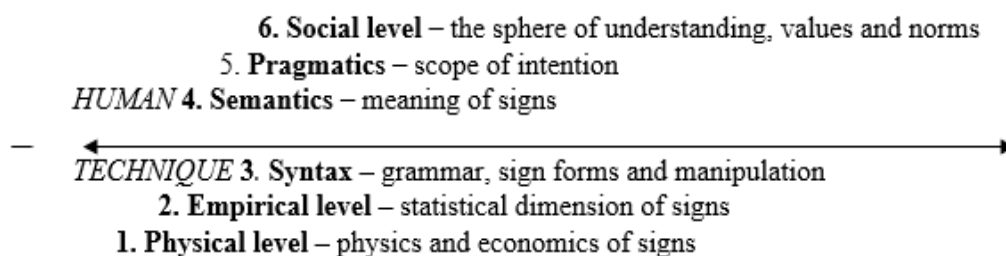
*The main concepts of the behavioral approach: definitions, logical relationships and transitions.*

The main concepts and terms on which R. Stamper builds his behavioral approach are: the concepts of the "*semiotic ladder*" and the "*information field*".

The "*information field*" includes the concepts of "*umwelt*" and "*affordance*". The concept of the "*semiotic ladder*" can be seen as the starting point for the development of "organizational semiotics", as it contained the main programmatic provisions of the latter implicitly. The scientist himself

links the emergence of this concept to the crisis in defining information during the late 1960<sup>s</sup> and early 1970<sup>s</sup>. At that time, approaches were mostly based on vague and subjective terms. According to (Stamper, 2001, p. 6), it was necessary to replace subjective evaluations with objective, practical, and empirically verifiable information. To begin this reorientation, an ostensive definition of information could be used. Ostensional definition is a type of indirect definition that uses visual examples. It is commonly used when defining a concept is challenging due to its genus and species, but it is possible to provide specific visual examples.

The concept of signs is a prime example in the field of information. Signs can be perceived, recorded, demonstrated, processed, and ordered, allowing for connections to be established with reality. Additionally, signs are related to the intersubjective sphere, where people can efficiently interpret them. The "semiotic ladder" is a visual diagram that displays all possible dimensions of a sign in detail. It is a useful tool for demonstrating the various aspects of a sign objectively (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** – "Semiotic ladder"

*Source: built by the authors*

The diagram illustrates the technical dimensions of the mark. The first three rungs represent the physical qualities of the sign, such as shape, size, intensity, transmission rate, and source. At the empirical level, we are no longer dealing with individual signs, but with their ordered flows of a certain configuration. This stage is best developed within the framework of mathematical information theory, where coding, transmission efficiency, and entropy measurement are important considerations. The highest level of the primary ladder is the syntactic level of grammar and rules for combining signs. This field encompasses programming and sign processing.

The ascent to higher levels of the hierarchy involves a direct connection to human activity. The semantic level deals with issues of meaning, truth, and denotation that arise during social interaction. The pragmatic level pertains to the implicit intentions, goals, and negotiations embedded in communication exchanges. Lastly the highest level – social – concerns understanding, beliefs, social norms, and values. According to R. Stamper, knowledge comprises of our worldview positions and universal norms that guide our behavior, either directly or indirectly. Worldview positions are a type of norm, and signs are only valuable if they can influence the norms of groups of people or their worldviews (Stamper, 2001, p. 12).

Thus, it can be said that Stamper has succeeded in expressing the main aspects of the information functioning of a modern organization within the "semiotic ladder". If the sphere of various technical devices and software is

expressed by the first level of the ladder, then intersubjective communication is the second. This kind of information interaction includes not only the elementary level of human communication or the sphere of understanding, intentions and values, but also inter-organizational relations and contacts between organizations. However, it is obvious that the "semiotic ladder" should take into account another important aspect of the modern functioning of organizations, the importance of which is only growing in the current environment (primarily due to the invention and increasing use of artificial intelligence) – the problem of human interaction with computers and new types of software, in other words, how can the first and second levels of the "semiotic ladder" interact effectively?

It should be noted, however, that despite the recognition of the importance of studying all the levels of the "semiotic ladder" in the context of the functioning of the organization, the main emphasis in the behavioral approach was placed on studying its upper levels. More precisely, the social level or the level of social norms.

Social norms, in turn, are seen by Stamper as a particular variant or type of information field (Stamper, 2001), (Liu, 2000).

Thus, the *information field* is defined as "a set of social norms accepted by members of a particular community that express knowledge about desired and exemplary behavior in that community" (Gazendam, 2004, p. 5).

In other words, social norms are certain, not always conscious and explicit, laws that are followed by members of a particular community, which can be a family, a family, a business organization, a party, and so on. Each such community is a kind of information field. It is the existence of such a field within an organization that enables the members of that community to carry out their behavior in a certain orderly and organized way. In essence, it is a kind of coercive structure that forces the members of the community to act in a certain way. On the other hand, the process of forming common social norms in the community allows for a certain consensus and agreement on them. Social norms that constitute the information field can be defined by certain characteristics. These include: the conditions for their implementation, the situation that triggers activation (*triggering state*), the agents responsible for initiating or avoiding an action (*responsible agent*), the normative operator (*deontic operator*) that helps us to clarify whether an action is possible, obligatory or vice versa. In addition, each of these norms has a specific time frame (beginning, duration and end) (Stamper, 2004). It is precisely the possibility of describing an organization by identifying the social norms that make up the information field that makes it possible to use them for the development of (computer) information systems.

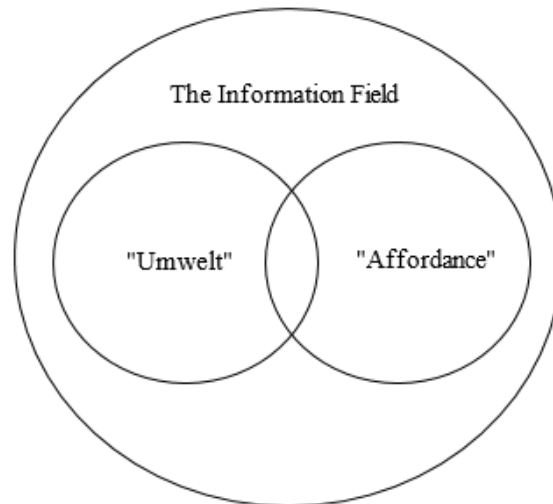
To some extent, the concept of information field can be clarified by comparing it with the concept of *Umwelt*. The term was coined by the German and Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexkull (Uexkull, 1982). By environment, he means a certain special communicative relationship with the world that various biological organisms, including humans, build up in the course of their lives. According to the scientist, each organism, although existing in a certain common communicative field, has its own personal and unique environment.

The construction of this world, the contact between the world and the organism, is based on the fact that the latter chooses only what is suitable for it in all its diversity, and the environment around it allows this choice. In addition, this choice is conditioned by the peculiarities of its organization and the needs for survival and successful activity. It is quite possible and productive to analyze this relationship between organism and environment as a kind of communication and exchange of signs (Kull, 1998). Similar to the information field, the Umwelt is an organized semiotic space in which an individual resides. However, while the former emphasizes normativity, coercion, and consensus, the latter prioritizes communicative and dialogical aspects, despite its biological context. Each individual constructs their own worldview through communicative exchanges, not only within society but also with the *environment*. It is important to remember that each individual's Umwelt is holistic, despite being made up of different information fields represented by various communities such as family, work, political party, and religious community. Stamper strengthens and clarifies the concepts of the information field and Umwelt by introducing a third concept – affordance. The concept was developed by J. Gibson, an American psychologist and biologist who created the ecological theory of perception (Gibson, 1979).

"*Affordance*", borrowed from evolutionary biology, is a term used to describe the possibilities provided by the objects in the world around us. Interaction with objects allows us to learn about their possibilities, gain life experience, and socialize. For instance, the shape of a chair indicates that it is suitable for sitting; the handle on a cup indicates that it can be held in our hands, and the rungs of a ladder indicate that we can climb it. Stamper argues that affordances highlight the relationship between an individual and their *environment*, based on behavioral patterns that have been practiced in a community over time (Gazendam, 2004, p. 5). Essentially, affordances refer to the opportunities that the environment provides to the organism, which then acts on these opportunities. As with Umwelt, it is important to consider the relationship between the organism and the environment, where the environment provides certain opportunities and the organism responds to them.

All efforts are classified into physical and social. The former refers to a set of behaviors related to the recognition of the properties of the physical environment, while the latter operates within the social environment. For instance, social behaviors are tuned to a specific social environment or are conditioned by the roles and responsibilities that people have in a community. Stamper defines social affords as social constructs that can only be performed and created by actors with certain social powers. Physical affords accumulate knowledge over time and are passed down from generation to generation.

The information field can thus be seen as a set of physical and social affords accepted by a particular community. Social affords can be seen as social constructs that exist in the form of signs created by certain authorized agents. The proposed Venn diagram visually demonstrates the logical relationships between the main concepts of the behavioral approach (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2** – Logical connections between main concepts

*Source: built by the authors*

*Basic methodologies of the behavioral approach.*

The concepts discussed above have become the conceptual basis for *MEASURE* (*Method for Eliciting, Analyzing and Specifying User's Requirements*), a research program that encompasses several working methodologies for the study of organizations. The main aim of this program is to provide a set of methods that can be used by researchers and business users in understanding, developing, managing and using information systems.

One of the fundamental positions of *MEASURE* is social constructivism. Like its proponents, the researchers in this program believe that the environment in which we live is socially and subjectively constructed. In business systems, there are many agents/actors who are guided by different forces in the information field. These forces are related to their interests, tasks, goals and values. They usually take the form of formal or informal rules, beliefs, cultural habits and conventions, which can be called norms.

The *MEASURE* methodologies include *Problem Articulation Methods*, *Semantic Analysis Method*, *Norm Analysis Method*, *Communication and Control Analysis*, and *Meta-Systems Analysis*. However, the most developed and effective methods are the *Semantic Analysis Method* (SAM) and the *Norm Analysis Method* (NAM).

The main focus of Semantic Analysis is on Business Systems and other types of organizations. The developers of this methodology acknowledge that it is impossible to comprehend and cover all aspects of an organization's functioning using a single methodology, no matter how effective it may be. Therefore, they concentrate primarily on modeling and reproducing the semantics of the behavioral aspects of its members. A crucial aspect of this methodology is a well-developed formalization method that enables the modeling, analysis, refinement, and presentation of user requirements. A further step in this formalization process is the creation of ontological diagrams that clearly illustrate the dependencies between the organization's actors and their behavioral affordances.

An important feature of the methodology is that it is usually developed in

four phases: 1) *problem definition*; 2) *candidate affordance generation*; 3) *candidate grouping*; and 4) *ontology charting*. Within the first phase, the main task of the researcher is to identify and understand the problem to be solved. The second phase consists of generating a list of semantic units that can be used to build models for describing agents and their behaviors. The phase of grouping agents allows the continuation of the previous one, i.e. the further analysis of the semantic units. Finally, the creation of ontology diagrams is essentially the final stage in the creation of semantic models of the organization.

Normative Analysis is considered a continuation and complement to previous approaches. According to behavioral approach representatives Andy Salter and Kechen Liu, Normative Analysis is a method that studies norm features, including implementation conditions, empowered agents, and triggers (Salter & Liu, 2002). It can also be said that Normative Analysis is concerned with identifying common patterns of agent behavior within various business systems and organizations. It studies the regularities of this behavior, the behavioral patterns that govern this behavior. As with Semantic Analysis, various formalization options are also actively used in this field. The results are often represented in a special knowledge representation language (NORMA), which is then translated into a computing language (LEGOL) for further processing.

The similarity of normative analysis to semantic analysis is also evident in the fact that it also unfolds in four phases, namely: 1) *responsibility analysis*, 2) *information identification*, 3) *trigger analysis*, and 4) *detailed norm specification*.

The initial stage requires identification of the agents responsible for initiating or completing specific actions. The subsequent stage, Information Identification, involves identifying and analyzing the information required to make decisions that the responsible agent makes. During the Trigger Analysis stage, 'any temporal, substantive, or semiotic causes responsible for triggering the norms are identified' (Salter & Liu, 2002). The Refinement of Norms' Details stage formalizes the results of the analysis collected in the previous stages.

**Conclusions.** The emergence of organizational semiotics is closely related to the problems that have arisen due to the information society and its impact on organizational activities and understanding. It is important to note that subjective evaluations should be excluded unless clearly marked as such. To address the limitations of previous approaches, it was necessary to supplement them with additional methods. This is due to the lack of scientific justification and failure to consider the impact of new software on the organization's communication space, which can lead to the emergence of new information relationships. Organizational semiotics is an approach that studies organizations as complex information systems. These systems include both programs or devices and communication structures created by people, as well as the relationships between them. This approach is used in the field of *Human-Computer Interaction*.

Stamper views any organization as a complexly ordered information field. Information production occurs at various levels, known as the "semiotic ladder", but the most crucial levels are those related to the organization's social

functioning. Structuring and organizing information at this level is achieved through social norms that accumulate knowledge and serve as rules of coexistence within the team, expressed in the form of signs. However, the founder of the behavioral approach also considers this same information field as Umwelt. The diversity of relations between the organism and the environment is reduced to a communicative exchange. This exchange can be effective if it is organized and ordered. "Affords" implies normativity and orderliness, as it refers to opportunities provided by the environment and behavioral patterns that govern human behavior. At the same time, due to communicative interaction and the fact that any pattern can be seen as socially constructed and acquired knowledge, affords can also be seen as a normalized and ordered information field.

These fundamental concepts have been consolidated and are used in the methodologies developed in the behavioral approach. They are most effective in semantic and normative analysis. The former aims primarily to study the behavioral semantics of the social agents that make up an organization, while the latter examines the patterns that govern this behavior.

*Conflict of Interest and other Ethics Statements*

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**Павло ХРАПКО, Наталія ЗОЩУК, Оксана КЛЮХА**  
**ГОЛОВНІ ПРИНЦИПИ (ПОНЯТТЯ, МЕТОДИ) ОРГАНІЗАЦІЙНОЇ**  
**СЕМІОТИКИ РОНАЛЬДА СТЕМПЕРА**

**Анотація.** Метою роботи є детальний аналіз «організаційної семіотики» Рональда Стемпера. Поведінковий підхід, у якому вона втілена, на теперішній час вважається одним з найефективніших сучасних методів вивчення, аналізу та проектуванні організацій різноманітного типу.

Відповідно до поставленої цілі головну увагу в роботі було зосереджено на розкритті змісту головних понять організаційної семіотики, виявленні логічних взаємозв'язків між ними та розгляді методологічних принципів. В якості основних власних методологічних стратегій у роботі було використано аналітичний та компаративний методи. Перший з заявлених методів було використано у процесі дефініції основних понять та методологічного арсеналу організаційної семіотики. Другий у якості інструменту їхнього порівняльного співставлення та розкриттю смислових взаємозв'язків між ними.

Продемонстровано, що в реаліях інформаційного суспільства «організаційна семіотика» Рональда Стемпера є новим міждисциплінарним методом вивчення та проектування організацій. В рамках цього підходу організація розуміється як необхідний компонент сучасної інфосфери, як складна інформаційна структура, що твориться комунікативними процесами, об'єктами та послугами. Встановлено як глобальні так і локальні причини появи цього підходу, а також її різновиди.

Виявлено, що одним з найефективніших методологічних варіантів «організаційної семіотики» Рональда Стемпера є так званий Поведінковий підхід. Проаналізовано його концептуальну основу, яка складається з понять «інформаційного поля», «афордансу», «семіотичної драбини» та «Умвельту». Продемонстровано тісні смислові взаємозв'язки між вказаними поняттями. Показано, що за допомогою даних концептів функціонування організації розуміється як особливий семіотичний простір, конституйований різноманітними поведінковими патернами та соціальними нормами. Спираючись на них соціальні агенти мають змогу здійснювати комунікативні дії, творити або змінювати знання, дотримуватися чи відступати від формальних та неформальних норми спільного існування. Проаналізовано основні методології поведінкового підходу (семантичний та нормативний) та розкриті головні фази їхнього розгортання.

**Ключові слова:** «організаційна семіотика», інформаційне суспільство, поведінковий підхід, теорія організації, управління, моделювання.