

Signs in Motion: Semiotic Perspectives on Migration

Although migration can be regarded as a “normal feature of civilization” (Bade and Oltmer 2004) and the term “migration” has been in use in the German-speaking world since the end of the 16th century, it played hardly any role in public or academic discourse as late as the 1970s. This changed fundamentally over the following twenty years. As one of the most visible components of globalization, “migration,” as Espahangizi (2023, 210) writes, became a “dazzling subject of public controversy,” “around which migration societies revolve and through which they are, to some extent, also constituted.” Migration—sometimes an everyday occurrence and often unremarkable, partly intentional and frequently unintentional—has become a perennial topic that is now frequently discussed in public in “spectacular and controversial terms” (Bartels et al. 2023, 7).

Migration transforms geographical, social, cultural, and religious spaces in both regions of origin and destination and reshapes relationships right down to the family level—including through the intensive use of digital technologies. It can be regarded as a driver of innovation. For along with people, ideas and concepts migrate that fundamentally transform a society’s knowledge and everyday culture—such as culinary traditions, musical preferences, or sartorial customs. Migration creates new forms and possibilities for exchange and experience, communication, and interaction at the societal, interpersonal, and individual levels, while simultaneously setting in motion a multitude of social, cultural, political, and aesthetic processes of negotiation concerning identity, participation, and demarcation.

Migration is, at its core, a semiotic phenomenon that can be analyzed in greater detail using various semiotic methods and approaches (Cobarrubias 2025; Krzyżanowski and Ekström 2025; Pelsmaekers and Van Hout 2020; Panjwani 2024): The very term “migration” is a semiotic construct that establishes the categorical distinction between “us” and “the other,” as well as regions of origin and destination as such (Yildiz 2014). Furthermore, migration and mobility only become significant when borders are crossed—borders of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1990), not only national but also ethnic or linguistic in nature. In such political, cultural, legal, economic, social, and ultimately ideological spaces, access and belonging are often established only within and through diverse semiotic—frequently multimodal and mediatized, and today digitized—processes of self- and other-categorization at the macro, meso, and micro levels.

At the same time, migration challenges existing orders within these spaces and fundamentally transforms them. The repertoires of signs and practices in use multiply; the semiotic landscapes in cities and villages, in educational institutions as well as in administrative bodies and businesses become more complex; traditional notions of binary categorization are undermined; and new forms of belonging become

necessary. Through the multiplied array of signs, migration thus challenges traditional identities, evokes new possibilities for identity construction, and simultaneously fosters new lines of conflict, discourses, and forms of negotiation—migration becomes a politicized issue.

The conference is dedicated to the phenomenon of “migration” from a semiotically grounded, interdisciplinary perspective. We invite submissions that analyze migration as a semiotically relevant social, political, and cultural phenomenon and employ theoretical and methodological approaches from semiotics.

Possible topics include:

- Topographies of migration from a semiotic perspective
Spatial and symbolic dimensions of mobility, border-drawing, and the production of space
- Positioning, identity, and migration
Semiotic processes of self- and other-categorization, belonging, difference, and *stance-taking*
- Migration, media, and representation
Multimodal Representations in Media, Art, and Public Discourse
- Language, Culture, and Migration
Multilingualism, new linguistic practices, and cooperative and conflictual forms of language use
- Education and Diversity
Migration, linguistic and cultural diversity in educational settings
- Religion and Transformation
Religious symbolic practices and their changes in the context of migration
- Transformation of Relationships in and Through Migration
Semiotic Dynamics in Social and Family Networks
- Migration, Aesthetics, and Semiotics
Shaping, Perception, and Symbolic Forms of Migration
- Economy, Markets, and Migration
Migration, Globalization, and Internationalization: New Target Groups, Products, Brands, and Market Logics
- Theory of Science, Migration, and Semiotics
Epistemological Perspectives and Theoretical Frameworks
- Body, Gesture, and Migration
Embodied practices of signification and forms of physical expression in the context of migration
- Post-migrant Perspectives and Semiotics
Sign-Making Processes from a Post-Migrant Perspective
- Refugeehood, Diaspora, and Liminality.
Sign and Media Practices of Bridging

Calls for papers for the individual panels can be found at
<https://www.semiotik.eu/signs-in-motion-papers-2027>

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Information on Organization and Schedule

The conference will take place from September 28 to October 2, 2027, at the University of Education Schwäbisch Gmünd. The exact time slots for the individual sessions have not yet been determined. For further information, please contact the DGS's president, Prof. Dr. Daniel Rellstab (daniel.rellstab@ph-gmuend.de).