Signs and Society (2026), **14** (1), 1–6
doi:10.1017/sas.2025.10044

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

ARTICLE

The Semiotics of Improvisation

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Abstract
This special issue pursues a social semiotic study of improvisation. The approach considers the phenomenon both as a constitutive dimension of action and as a socially recognizable achievement. Contributions share a common focus on interaction, which is analyzed across multiple modalities including virtual reality, heavy machinery, paint and canvas, rock, theater, war, and the ethical relation between self and other.

Keywords: semiotics; improvisation; action; social interaction; multimodality; performance

One reason that improvisation continues to challenge systematic theorization owes perhaps to the way it saturates human action. Consider the many seemingly intuitive accounts of the phenomenon found in the respective introductions to any number of rich interdisciplinary volumes glossing its distinct character in, for instance, creativity, novelty, spontaneity, indeterminacy, real-time execution, and generativity. Contributing to this eclecticism, a diversity of fields, including specifically classics, ethnomusicology, and social theory, have pursued the phenomenon from a variety of distinct analytic standpoints. The classicist Milman Parry ([1928–1935] 1987), and later Albert Lord ([1960] 2000), placed the study of improvisation on social scientific footing by exploring the role of mnemonic formulae in structuring the relevant contours for possible improvisation within the historically layered evolution of epic poetry. It is ethnomusicological inquiry into jazz performance, however, that has most significantly advanced the institutionalization of improvisation studies (landmark works include Ferand 1938; Sudnow 1978; and Berliner 1994; see Nettl 1998). Improvisation is here a patterning that follows no discernible script, inspiring anthropologists such as Tambiah (1985), Sawyer (1996; a contributor to this issue), and others to further pursue its social character. Mid-twentieth-century social theory has then offered a complementary perspective on improvisation with respect to social structure. Lévi-Strauss's ([1962] 1966, 17) *bricoleur*, who is adept at "mak[ing] do with 'whatever is at hand,'" and Bourdieu's ([1972] 1977, 78) *habitus*, "the durably installed generative principle

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https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10044 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of regulated improvisation," conceptualize improvisation in its tension with structured rule-following.

This special issue of *Signs and Society* pursues an expansive investigation of improvisation in its pragmatic richness, drawing insights from the studies of theater, dance, and performance; gesture; ethnomusicology; oratory; philosophy; and digital media. In doing so, we build on our panel session, "The Anthropology of Improvisation," organized for the 2022 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, held in Seattle, Washington. In our investigation, we have found that modern semiotic ideologies (Keane 2018), and relatedly social ontologies and metaphysics, may themselves obscure the phenomenon. In an ethnographic study of jazz education at two influential colleges of music practice in the United States, Wilf (2014a) finds that romantic ideological investments in expressivity, emotivity, and spontaneity obfuscate the creativity of improvisation by positing innate genius, assigning individuals responsibility for this genius, and locating failures of creativity in their innate qualities. Wilf (2014b) also finds that this romantic obfuscation, emblematized in neoliberal valorizations of entrepreneurial risk-taking for instance, stands against other, also entrenched but contrasting ideological investments in the coldness, technicity, and rule-governed disenchantment so often attributed to institutional rationality. Here, we find that other semiotic ideological orientations than those of romanticism and the Enlightenment may instead reveal the social interactional cultivation of improvisation, problematizing the seeming opposition between self-expression and social convention. In a study of a women's piety movement based in the mosques of Cairo, Mahmood (2001, 844) finds a pursuit of piety that involves an induced weeping during prayer, such that convention serves rather than undermines the interactional cultivation of "the self's spontaneous and effortless expressions."

The approach taken in this issue turns to social semiotic analysis for its emphasis both on the indexical contingency of human involvement and on the reflexivity of sign-processes. Contributions generally converge around linguistic and semiotic anthropological approaches and tend to focus on multimodal face-to-face interaction. Of course, social scientific field research is itself notoriously rife with improvisational methods and the improvisation of methods (*e.g.,* see Hurston 1935). Theorizing from their year-long email correspondence as student field researcher and teacher respectively, Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) identify a constitutively improvisational hermeneutic in ethnographic research. The uneven tempo of ethnographic interpretation—marked by aimlessness, anxiety, and circularity—constitutes "*continually adjusted practices in real time*, out of which theoretical insights are frequently produced" (Cerwonka 2007, 37; emphasis added). This process requires the ethnographer to be "constantly adjusting one's tactics and making judgments based on particular contexts that one can never fully anticipate" (ibid., 21), here, precisely and explicitly, much like the *bricoleur*. Malkki (2007) further elaborates that anthropology not only requires an improvisational sensibility but is itself a history of successive improvisations (ibid., 179–80) in that the practice of ethnography requires building on learned know-how; informal apprentice-like study among peers, teachers, and the field itself including key informants; oral pedagogies that teach from others' experiences; the valorization of creativity as well as riffing on and quoting of others; the tacking between formulated knowledge and newly invented ideas; the willingness to risk mistakes; and the negotiation

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of all these elements in the field in real time—indeed, here explicitly likening ethnographic practice to jazz improvisation (ibid., 182–86). In light of these cautions and insights, we find that social semiotic analysis can reveal the many ways that improvisation is both a constitutive dimension of action and a socially recognizable achievement.

That is, first, an analysis of improvisation tending to the pragmatic richness of action reveals the indexical entanglements of its real-time enactment. In the volume *Creativity in Performance* edited by R. Keith Sawyer (1997) (a contributor to this special issue), Silverstein (1997) glosses "language-in-use" as improvisational performance (ibid., 266), such that "a real social act ... happens *improvisationally* each time there is discursive interaction" (ibid., 282). Here, improvisation is understood as "spontaneous language use" (ibid., 266), or the "contingent, processual, and dialectic nature" (ibid., 273) of texts-in-context, or parole as such. This expansive view on improvisation stands in a longer lineage. Bruner (1993, 321) formulates an analysis of improvisational action in terms of how social actors "construct their lives as they live their lives" (for resonant glosses in literary studies, see Bruns 1978; in ethnomusicology, see Nettl and Russell 1998; and in Black Studies, see Moten 2003). The reflexivity formulated in this gloss prioritizes the process that stages any formulation of a plan. Improvisation is therefore not one specific kind of ritual among others, but instead constitutive of action whatsoever because each moment demands of it an unforeseen specificity. That is, the notion of improvisation draws attention to the pragmatic richness of action in its real-time enactment, emphasizing the indexical entanglements of its process. Ingold and Hallam ([2007] 2021) have since glossed improvisation among social actors as their having "to work it out as they go along" in that it is generative, not conditional upon judgments of the novelty or otherwise of the forms it yields; relational, not pitting the individual against either nature or society; temporal, inhering in the onward propulsion of life rather than being broken off; and the way we work, inseparable from our performative engagements with the materials that surround us. So understood, we find that improvisation offers itself as an irreducible dimension of action in its actual performance.

Yet, we also find that improvisation bears normative shape insofar as it is to be achieved, and is relatedly cultivatable, appraisable, and measurable against standards. Duranti and Black (2011) observe that speech communities regulate socialization into verbal improvisation according to cultural standards of seamlessness, effectiveness, and appropriateness. Novices must learn standards for appropriate performative variation and spontaneous verbal creativity, both in what they master and how they master it; according to standards by which it is conceived, executed, and interpreted; and such that cross-cultural similarities in performance and evaluation are not uncommon. Here, improvisation is both conditioned by convention and socialized by toleration or not for variation. In an ethnography (of speaking) of "Indian time" among Warm Springs Indians at a reservation in Oregon, Philips (1989) finds that vagueness surrounding the schedule, start, and end of events maximizes the opportunity for participation by community members, whereas outsiders often find themselves vexed by this indeterminacy. In this context, collective improvisation organizes the timing of ritual events based on the number of participants needed, their interdependence, and their degree of commitment, but not on any decision attributable to any one individual. Rosaldo's (1993) ethnographic study among Ilongots of northern Luzon

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10044 Published online by Cambridge University Press

builds on this finding, arguing that optionality, variability, and unpredictability make room for virtuosic performance in the politics of everyday life, or social grace, because the indeterminacy of improvisation allows social actors to follow impulses, change directions, and coordinate with others. So understood, improvisation is valorizable both in instances of its performance and in its social enregisterment.

Contributors to this special issue pursue these considerations with attention to social interaction, specifically in the embodiment of coordination. Drawing on controlled laboratory experiments involving undergraduate research participants playing two virtual reality games, Mendoza-Denton finds that interactants make adjustments to repair and reincorporate action in light of "clams," a term borrowed from jazz referring to mistimed or maladroit actions, and "glitches," a term from software engineering referring to malfunctions. In cases wherein toggling fluently between virtual reality and non-virtual reality requires parallel performance across these modalities, the body exceeds pre-scripted interactional norms and enters a state of affective experimentation with improvisational openings. Examining dance instructors and heavy-machinery-operating arborist dancers co-ordinating their collaborative production of a performance by stepping into each other's professional worlds, Ingram identifies the "situated improvisation" of human–machine dance choreography in Austin, Texas. Here, gestural "marking" creates a visually shared framework for translating, innovating, assuming one another's perspectives, opening up improvisatory spaces, and building a shared background of embodied knowledge, which helps sediment into routines what are initially uncertainties and contingencies in the early stages of rehearsal. In this case, interactants modeling the movement of heavy machinery gradually improvise into existence a shared background against which communicative practice becomes reliable. In both contributions, Goodwin's framework for co-operative action (2018) is revelatory, directing analytic focus to the intersubjective inhabitation of one another's roles undertaken by interactants, the multimodality of interaction, and the real-time reformulation of previously performed actions by others. In each case, machine-mediated interaction provides an opportunity to examine the semiotic labor required to adjust comportment to the non-human and to create a background of knowledge that can be reliably recruited for further action.

We find that improvisational performance helps explain crucial aspects of interactionally emergent forms, whose seeming self-standing might otherwise draw attention away from their processual genesis. One of the key themes is gestural lexicalization as one inroad into the spectrum from ephemeral to highly conventionalized forms (Kendon 1988; Lempert 2019). In an examination of both rock climbers preparing for their ascent across the face of a rock by anticipating hand grips appropriate for the contours of a hold and women rapidly flipping one another's hands in a hierarchized form of deferential handshaking found in Kenya's Swahili Coast, Hillewaert finds that these seemingly disparate ethnographic sites demonstrate the constitutive riskiness of improvisational action. In each case, virtuosic dexterous alacrity is demanded, whether for reliably climbing a wall at the risk of falling or properly negotiating a handshake at the risk of violating the norms of social rank and grace. Crucially, the stakes of improvisational action motivate the refunctionalization of gesture, for instance climbers resorting to previewing, or acting out their grips in preparation for a climb so as to minimize the need for improvisation. In an interview with an art historian explaining the painting

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10044 Published online by Cambridge University Press

techniques involved in abstract expressionism, Streeck finds that brush strokes inscribed on canvas are taken to index the movement that produces them as "spontaneous." Here, a de-lexicalization of conventional painting gesture is crucial for art historical and critical ideation about the spontaneity of expressive art and for the use of co-speech gesture to explain gestural art as if it were spontaneous, despite the premeditation also required in its production.

In light of our inquiry, we find that considerations of improvisation call for the further exploration of fundamental questions regarding the ontology of involvement, of action, and of the social. Sawyer's longstanding research characterizes improvisation with respect to its unpredictable endpoints and moment-to-moment contingency in performance contexts. In an empirical study of improvisational theater, which remains the focus of his contribution here, Sawyer offers a framework for the social ontology of improvisational collaboration, paying particular attention to its levels of organization under the rubrics of emergence and reduction. In examining Sikh philosophical intimations of cosmic play (*līlā*) and equipoise (*sahaj*), Hothi asks how play and improvisation, each and together, might imply the open-endedness of semiosis, in that sign-processes operate without ultimate goal, target, or finality. Through a strategic encounter between modern theories of play, including semiotics and deconstruction, and key textual sources for Sikh philosophy, the argument is that, among other things, the non-purposiveness of the cosmos in general, and of action in particular, implies the constitutively abductive character of practical involvement.

We conclude this special issue with afterthoughts presented in the form of a roundtable discussion. Contributors reflect on the implications of their findings for the study of interaction, lexicalization, and social ontology, as well as future directions for research.

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Cite this article: Hothi, Randeep Singh. 2026. "The Semiotics of Improvisation." *Signs and Society* 14 (1): 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10044

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