Andreichuk N.I.
Problematizing the Notion of Cross-cultural Semiosis

_____

Andreichuk Nadiya, Doctor of Philology, professor
Ivan Franko Lviv National University, Lviv, Ukraine

Abstract. The article provides an insight into the semiotics of culture in general and the notion of cultural semiosis in particular. The concept of culture text is viewed as the core of the cultural semiotics. The author claims that transforming information into text is the communication-oriented sense generation process which results in the emergence of semiotic space. It is postulated that the cultural mechanism of transforming information into text is but another definition of semiosis. The article also provides argumentation to support the belief that cross-cultural semiosis is based on cultural schemata in the context of differences of lingual communities' basic experiences. The study of differences in expectations based on these cultural schemata is viewed as a part of cross-cultural pragmatics.

Keywords: semiotics of culture, culture text, cultural semiosis, semiotic space, cultural schemata, cross-cultural semiosis, cross-cultural pragmatics

> ***Culture is a space of mind for the production of semiosis***
> ***(Yuriy Lotman)***

The purpose of this essay is to revise some fundamental ideas concerning semiosis as the process of cooperation between signs, their objects, and their interpretants and to introduce some new insights into the notion of cross-cultural semiosis.

Philosophers and linguists have always discussed signs in one way or another but until recently there had been no attempt to bring together the whole range of phenomena, linguistic and non-linguistic, which could be considered as signs, and to make the problem of the sign the centre of intellectual enquiry. It was only in the early years of the 20th century that the American philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure envisaged a comprehensive science of signs. Their projects lie at the heart of semiotics. The programme outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure was easy to grasp: linguistics would serve as example and its basic concepts would be applied to other domains of social and cultural life. A lingual sign is the basic unit of language, for a language is simply a large number of signs related to one another in various ways. The internal structure of a sign is binary: it consists of a slice or segment of sound, which he calls a signifier (*signifiant*), combines with a slice or segment of thought, a signified (*signifié*).

Ch. Peirce is a different case. He devoted himself to *semeiotic* as he called it, which would be the science of sciences, since „the entire universe is perfused with signs if it is not composed exclusively of signs" [13, p. 394]. Ch. Peirce's voluminous writings on semiotics are full of taxonomic speculations. There are 10 trichotomies by which signs can be classified (only one of which, distinguishing icon, index and symbol, has been influential), yielding a possible 59 049 classes of sign. Certain dependencies allowed scholars to reduce this number to 66 classes but even this has been too many. One has to agree with J. Culler that the complexity of his scheme and the swarm of neologisms created to characterize different types of sign have discouraged others from entering his system and exploring his insights [3].

Both semiotic projects have produced different ideas concerning semiosis. In structuralist tradition semiosis is the operation which, by setting up a relationship of reciprocal presupposiotion between the expression form and the content form (in L. Hjelmslev's terminology) – or the signifier and the signified (F. de Saussure) – produces signs: in this sense any language act implies a semiosis. The term

is synonymous with *semiotic function* [5, p. 285]. Ch. Pierce used the term *semeiosy* to designate any sign action or sign process, and also *semiosis* (pluralized as *semioses*). He claims that its variant *semeiosis* „in Greek of the Roman period, as early as Cicero's time, if I remember rightly, meant the action of almost any kind of signs" (cited from [10, p. 28]). For Ch. Pierce, semiosis is a triadic process in which an *object* generates a *sign* of itself and, in turn, the sign generates an *interpretant* of itself. The interpretant in its turn generates a further interpretant, ad infinitum. Thus, semiosis is a process in which a potentially endless series of interpretants is generated. A sign stands for something (its *object*); it stands for something to somebody (its *interpretant*); and finally it stands for something to somebody in some respect (this respect is called its *ground*). The relationship between the terms, *representamen*, *object*, *interpretant* and *ground* determines the precise nature of the process of semiosis. This relation must be read in two directions, firstly as determination, and secondly as representation: the object „determines" the interpretant, mediated by the sign, and both the sign and the interpretant „represent" the object. As R. Parmentier says, these are „two opposed yet interlocking vectors involved in semiosis" [9, p. 4]. If these vectors are brought into proper relations then knowledge of objects through signs is possible.

In this article semiosis is claimed to be t**he process by which representations of objects function as sign**s. It is the process of cooperation between signs, their objects, and their interpretants. Semiotics studies semiosis and is an inquiry into the conditions that are necessary in order for representations of objects to function as signs. Theories of semiotic mediation, such as those proposed by L. Vygotskyy, M. Bakhtin, B. L. Whorf and some others, agree on viewing signs and lingual signs, in particular, as being: 1) means of rationality in human cognition and 2) instruments of communication in social interaction. The exchange of signs in the context of interaction is socially meaningful only if there are conventional rules equating signs and meanings across contexts. The entire set of sign systems which endow the external world with value makes up culture: cultural signs form an interpretative mechanism through which the world is rendered meaningful.

The semiotic view of culture assumes the multiplicity and correlation of sign systems which are investigated on various levels. Most fundamental to cultural semiotics were the theories of the Prague Linguistic Circle and the

related early Russian structuralists, as they evolved under the leadership of R. Jakobson and J. Mukarovsky, departing from, and extending, Saussurian insights. These theories contributed to the extremely fruitful application of semiotics to aesthetic and other cultural systems. A pioneering work in this direction was P. Bogatyrev's study of folk costumes of Moravian Slovakia [2][1].

By the 1940s R. Jakobson brought the semiotics of Ch. Peirce to bear upon the developing semiotic point of view, thereby fundamentally broadening approaches to typologies, as well as to the dynamics of sign systems, particularly in the area of pragmatics. Moreover, the wartime contact between R. Jakobson and C. Levi-Strauss stimulated both these seminal thinkers, as is evidenced by their fundamental postwar studies in various aspects of cultural semiotics. Extremely significant work in the field under study has been carried out in Eastern Europe. The Tartu-Moscow group has devoted much attention to the semiotics of cultural systems and their mutual translatability. A compact summary of the basic principles of semiotics advanced by the Tartu-Moscow group became available in the West due to the publication of the „Structure of Texts and the Semiotics of Culture" [11], particularly since it opens with an English translation of the „Thesis on the Semiotic Study of Culture". The latter is considered to be a conceptual framework for the systemic and semiotic analysis of culture as a metasystem. It was written in 1973 by Yuriy Lotman together with his colleagues Boris Uspensky, Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov, Vladimir Toropov and Alexander Piatigorsky.

Two definitions are being most important for understanding the notion of cross-cultural semiosis: *cultural semiotics* and *culture text*. Tartu-Moscow group presented the definition of cultural semiotics, calling it a science studying the functional relatedness of sign systems circulating in culture that departs from the presupposition that it is possible to operationally (proceeding from the theoretical conception) describe pure sign systems functioning only in contact with each other and in mutual influences [14]. Since Y. Lotman held that all cultural semiotic systems were to be seen as secondary modeling systems, shaped „along the lines" of language, the linguistic concept of text began to be applied by analogy to all cultural behavior. Thus in defining culture as a certain secondary language Tartu-Moscow school introduced the concept of culture text, a text in this secondary language.

The culture text which is the structure through which a culture acquires information about itself and the surrounding context is a set of functional principles: (1) the text is a functioning semiotic unity; (2) the text is the carrier of any and all integrated messages (including human language, visual and representational art forms, rituals etc.); and (3) not all usages of human language are automatically defined as texts. „Theses" also defines distinct levels of text that are incorporated into any culture. All semiotic systems function in context as relative, not absolute, autonomous structures. As a result, what is perceived as a text in one culture may not be a text in a different cultural space (for more detailed analysis see [1; 18]).

The concept of culture text is the core of the semiotic studies on culture. But even more important is the cultural mechanism of transforming information into text: sense generation process. Any generation of sense is the activity of culture, thus **cultural semiosis is suggested to be defined as the communication-oriented process of generating culture texts**. Y. Lotman views communication as the circulation of texts in culture and suggests a typology of different, although complementary processes: 1) communication of the addresser and the addressee, 2) communication between the audience and cultural tradition, 3) communication of the reader with him/herself, 4) communication of the reader with the text, 5) communication between the text and cultural tradition [7, p. 276 – 277].

Culture as an intelligent relationship among systems requires a deep understanding of the interaction among codes and languages in the process of generating information and this opens another challenging vector of researching the process of semiosis. Cultural semiosis is the essence of culture. Semiotic space emerges inside the experiences of transforming information into sign systems. Thus information processes are the core of the semiotics of culture and **the cultural mechanism of transforming information into text is but another definition of semiosis**.

Before trying to apply this understanding of cultural semiosis for cross-cultural communication research it should be mentioned that according to Ch. Peirce semiosis starts from a given *outer sign*. The question of who produced it and why, falls outside the scope of his concept of semiosis. This bias is confirmed by his choice of terminology, i.e., especially of interpretant, that is *the inner sign* as an explanation, as a translation, of the outer sign. From the wider perspective of communication, or sign exchange, an outer sign can only be considered given to a particular sign observer after it has been produced by a particular sign engineer. V. Voloshinov[2] can be seen to apply this communication perspective right from the start of his theoretical development. This scholar emphasizes the representational nature of signs

---

[1] The work was published in Bratislava in 1937 and was issued in the English translation in 1971 in the series *Approaches to Semiotics.* P. Bogatyrev was one of the most active members of Prague Linguistic Circle and co-founder of the Moscow Linguistic Circle in 1915. He was greatly influenced by the Prague School and was in his turn to influence later scholars outside the field of structural linguistics, such as Claude Levi-Strauss who tried to apply some tenets of structural linguistics to solve problems of social and cultural anthropology.

[2] Valentin Voloshinov was one of those in post-revolutionary Russia who did succeed in developing a specifically Marxist conception of consciousness, and it was significant that he did so starting from an interest in the philosophy of language. Recently, the validity of Voloshinov's authorship of the book „ Marxism and the Philosophy of Language" has come into question. This book was first published in Leningrad in 1929 under the title „Marksizm i filosofiia iazyka: Osnovnye problemy sotsiologitseskogo metoda v nauke o iazyke (Marxism and the Philosophy of Language: Basic Problems of the Sociological Method in the Science of Language)". It has been suggested that it was in fact Mikhail Bakhtin who was the real author. It is probable we may never know the truth but it is worth pointing out that although this claim is now accepted uncritically by many commentators, it rests on certain unsubstantiated facts and contradictory assumptions.

He states that a sign does not simply exist as a part of a reality – it reflects and refracts another reality [15, p. 9] and he also expresses the communication perspective of sign: Signs can arise only on interindividual territory. Ten years later Ch. Pierce's pupil Ch. Morris introduces the interpreter as the component of semiosis and argues that the latter includes: 1) the sign vehicle (i.e. the object or event which functions as a sign), 2) the designatum (i.e. the kind of object or class of objects which the sign designates), 3) the interpretant (i.e. the disposition of an interpreter to initiate a response-sequence as a result of perceiving the sign), and 4) the interpreter (i.e. the person for whom the sign-vehicle functions as a sign) [8]. His fundamental ideas concern the role that a science of signs may play in analyzing language as a social system of signs. He devides semiotics into three interrelated sciences: 1) syntactics (the study of the methods by which signs may be combined to form compound signs), 2) semantics (the study of the signification of signs), and 3) pragmatics (the study of the origins, uses, and effects of signs). Thus semiosis has syntactical, semantical, and pragmatical levels or dimensions. The last dimension is governed by the relations which signs have to their producers and interpreters.

Ch. Morris' definition of pragmatics as the study of the relation of signs to their interpreters has been accepted and developed by different scholars. G. Yule defines four areas that pragmatics as the type of study is concerned with: 1) the study of meaning as communicated by the speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader); 2) the interpretation of what people mean in a particular context and how the context influences what is said; 3) how a great deal of what is said is recognized as part of what is communicated; 4) what determines the choice between the said and unsaid [19, p. 3]. He emphasizes that pragmatics is appealing because it is about how people make sense of each other linguistically, but it can be a frustrating area of study because it requires us to make sense of people and what they have in mind [19, p. 4]. From the first pages of his „Pragmatics" G. Yule attracts attention to cross-cultural differences that account for the differences in the contextual meaning communicated by a speaker or writer and in the interpretation of a listener or reader. Communicants belonging to one lingual and social group follow general patterns of behavior (including lingual) expected within the group. G.Yule describes his experience of answering questions about his health when he first lived in Saudi Arabia [19, p. 5]. He tended to answer them with his familiar routine responses of „*Okay*" or „*Fine*" but soon discovered that pragmatically appropriate in that context would be to use a phrase that had the literal meaning „*Praise to God*". Thus the phrase he used conveyed the meaning that he was a social outsider: more was being communicated than was being said. Thus cultural semiosis which was suggested to be defined as the communication-oriented process of generating culture text is based on **cultural schemata in the context on differences of our basic experiences.** The study of differences in expectations based on such schemata is part of a broad area of investigation generally known as **cross-cultural pragmatics**. This field of studies sprang up in the 1980s. Its emergence is associated with the names of such world-famous scholars as A. Wierzbicka, C. God-

dard, D. Tannen and others. The fundamental tenet of cross-cultural pragmatics, as understood by A. Wierzbicka, is based on the conviction that profound and systematic differences in ways of speaking in different societies and different communities reflect different cultural values, or at least different hierarchies of values. Different ways of speaking can be explained and made sense of in terms of independently established different cultural values and cultural priorities. To study different cultures in their culture-specific features we need a universal perspective: and we need a culture-independent analytical framework. We can find such a framework in **universal human concepts**, that is in concepts which are inherent in any human culture [16, p. 9]. The scholar believes that what we need for real „human understanding" is to find terms which would be both „theirs" and „ours". And she suggests that we can find such universal concepts in the universal alphabet of human thoughts suggested by G.W. Leinbnitz (1646–1716) [16, p. 10]. His philosophic-linguistic project is based on four principal tasks: 1) construction of the system of primes arranged as an alphabet of knowledge or general encyclopedia; 2) drawing up of an ideal grammar based on the template of simplified Latin; 3) introducing rules of pronunciation; 4) arrangement of lexicon containing real signs using which the speaker automatically acquires the ability to construct a true sentence. The system of signs suggested by Leibniz is based on the principle that language has to be improved through the introduction of the general terms denoting general ideas. People use words as signs of ideas and this is not because there are intrinsic connections between some articulate sounds and certain ideas (in this case, people would have only one language), but because of the arbitrary agreement, by virtue of which certain words are selected to mark certain ideas [6].

Leinbnitz's idea of the alphabet of knowledge correlates with the semantic metalanguage suggested by C. Goddard and A. Wierzbicka for cross-linguistic semantics. They believe that such a metalanguage ought to be based as transparently as possible on ordinary natural languages, and furthermore, it ought to consist as far as possible of elements whose meanings are present in all natural languages, i.e. of universally lexicalized meanings [4, p. 7]. Universal concepts are viewed as indefinable, i.e. semantically simple words and morphemes of natural languages such as *I, you, someone, something, this, think, say, want, do* which can be found in all the languages of the world. But it is in a clash with another language that the distinctness of a language (as a separate identity) reveals itself [17, p. 19].

The study of semiosis as the generation of culture texts can provide the penetration into the system of inherited conceptions expressed in sign forms by means of which people communicate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. To look at semiosis as the construction of signs by the speakers from different cultures and the relations which signs have to their producers and interpreters is the principal task of cross-cultural pragmatics. D. Tannen emphasizes that in analyzing the pragmatics of cross cultural communication, we are analyzing language itself and that there are eight levels of differences in signaling how speakers mean what they say, namely: when to talk, what to say, pacing and pausing,

listenership, intonation, formulaicity, indirectness, cohesion and coherence [12]. These levels can be explained through cultural schemata or models of culture. Thus, cross-cultural semiosis reflects the relations between language and context that are encoded in the texts of different cultures. It is the object of research in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics which belongs to the second dimension of pragmatic research.[3]

Summing up it should be emphasized that defining culture as the generation of senses one can claim that cultural semiosis as the generation of culture-texts is the heart of communication and provides for defining a group of people as a lingual and cultural community possessing its cultural schemata. Community places itself in relation to tradition and from perspective of cross-cultural communication cross-cultural semiosis becomes the key object of inquiry.

---

[3] One can single out three dimensions or axes of pragmatic research which allow to differentiate between different „types" of pragmatics: 1) the first dimension (generalist vs particularist approach) – the universal pragmatics and the language-specific pragmatics; 2) the second dimension (studying languages in isolation or in comparison) – culture-specific pragmatics and cross-cultural pragmatics; 3) the third dimension (diachronic vs synchronic) – language-state pragmatics and evolutionary pragmatics.

REFERENCES

1. Andrews E. Conversations with Lotman: cultural semiotics in language, literature and cognition / Edna Andrews. – Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. – 204 p.
2. Bogatyrev P. The Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia : Approaches to Semiotics 5 [Transl. by R.G. Crum] / Petr Bogatyrev. – The Hague; Paris: Mouton, 1971. – 120 p.
3. Culler J. The Pursuit of Signs. Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction / Jonathan Culler. – London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981. – 242 p.
4. Goddard C., Wierzbicka A. Men, Women and Children: the Conceptual Cemantics of Basic Social Categories / Cliff Goddard, Anna Wierzbicka. – URL: http://www.colorado.edu/ling/courses/LAM5430/More5430e-reserves/Basic_Social_Categories.pdf
5. Greimas A.J. Semiotics and Language : An Analytical Dictionary / Greimas A.J., Courtés J. [Gen. editor Thomas A. Sebeok]. – Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1979. – 409 p.
6. Leibnitz G.W. New Essays on Human Understanding / G.W. Leibnitz [Transl. and ed. by P.Remnant and J. Bennett]. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. – 312 p.
7. Lotman Y.M. Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture [Transl. by A. Shukman; intr. by U. Eco] / Yuri M. Lotman. – London, New York: I. B.Tauris & Co Ltd., 1990. – 288 p.
8. Morris Ch.Writings on the General Theory of Signs [Ed. by T.A. Sebeok] / Charles Morris. – The Hague: Mouton, 1971. – 486 p.
9. Parmentier R.J. Signs in Society: Studies in Semiotic Anthropology / Richard J. Parmentier. – Indiana University Press, 1994. – 225 p.
10. Sebeok Th.A. 'Semiotics' and its congeners / Thomas F. Sebeok // Studia z historii semiotyki: III Semiotic-historical studies [Ed. by Jan Sulowski]. – Wrocław, Warszawa, Kraków, Gdańsk: Zakład Narodowy imienia Ossolińskich, Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii nauk, 1976. – S. 27 – 38.
11. Structure of Texts and the Semiotics of Culture [Ed. by Jan van der Eng and Mojmir Grygar]. – The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter. 1973. – 372p.
12. Tannen D. The pragmatics of Cross-Cultural Communication / Deborah Tannen // Applied Linguistics, 1984. – Vol.5. – No.3. – P. 189 – 195
13. The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings. Volume 2 (1893 – 1913) [Ed. by Peirce Edition Project]. – Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998. – 624 p.
14. Torop P. Cultural semiotics and culture / Peeter Torop // Sign Systems Studies. – 1999. – Vol.27. – P. 9 – 3.
15. Voloshinov V. N. Marxism and the Philosophy of Language / V.N. Volosinov [Trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik]. – New York: Seminar Press, 1973. – 205 p.
16. Wierzbicka A. Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: The Semantics of Human Interaction / Anna Wierzbicka. –Berlin-New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003. – 502 p.
17. Wierzbicka A. Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words / Anna Wierzbicka. – New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. – 317 p.
18. Winner I.P., Winner Th.G. The Semiotics of cultural texts / Irene Portius Winner, Thomas G.Winner // Semiotica. – 1976. – 18:2. – P. 101 – 156.
19. Yule G. Pragmatics / George Yule. – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. – 138 p.

Андрейчук Н.И. Проблематизация понятия межкультурного семиозиса
Аннотация. Статья дает представление о семиотике культуры в целом и понятии культурного семиозиса в частности. Понятие текста культуры рассматривается как ключевое для семиотических исследований в области культуры. Автор утверждает, что преобразование информации в текст является коммуникативно-ориентированным процессом формирования семиотического пространства. Это смыслопорождающее преобразование рассматривается как семиозис. Статья также содержит аргументацию в поддержку утверждения, что межкультурный семиозис основывается на культурных моделях, которые вырабатываются языковыми сообществами, а их изучение – задача межкультурной прагматики.

Ключевые слова: семиотика культуры, текст культуры, культурный семиозис, семиотическое пространство, культурные модели, межкультурный семиозис, межкультурная прагматика