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Boris Uspenskij and the semiotics of communication: An essay and an interview

Abstract: At the core of this article is an interview to Boris Uspenskij, in which the well-known protagonist of the Tartu-Moscow School (currently Head of the Laboratory of Linguistics and Semiotics at the National Research University “Higher School of Economics” in Moscow) develops on semiotics and the sense and aims of semiotic research, communication and its central role in human consciousness, semiotic theory and methodology, in general and specifically referring to his personal approach. The interview is introduced by a brief essay, in which, by presenting and outlining the main thesis of *Ego Loquens* (one of the most recent works by Uspenskij, which so far has not appeared in English) and its articulations, Uspenskij’s reflections on the semiotics of communication emerge.

Keywords: Boris Andreevič Uspenskij; communication; semiotic methodology; deixis; personal pronouns; objective reality

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The core of this article is the interview kindly given to me by professor Boris Uspenskij on the occasion of his last visit to Lugano to teach semiotics to the students of the Faculty of Communication Sciences. In the interview, reproduced in the second part of the article, professor Uspenskij (currently Head of the Laboratory of Linguistics and Semiotics at the National Research University “Higher School of Economics” in Moscow) develops central issues of semiotics, communication, and semiotic methodology. The interview is introduced by a short (and necessarily incomplete) presentation of professor Uspenskij and his work, and particularly of one of his most recent (but also less known) publications that tackles the topic of semiotics of communication.

Boris Uspenskij is well-known in the community of semioticians as one of the protagonists of the semiotic school of Tartu-Moscow. Together with the other Moscovite members of the school, he represents the linguistic tradition (while Jury Lotman and the Leningrad side represent the literary tradition). He reached semiotics starting from linguistics, linguistic inquiries and perspectives having

always been of primary interest to him (Uspenskij 1996: 3–4). In numerous works he dealt with the typology of languages and language universals (cf. his early works on the structural typology of language; Uspenskij 1968), the philology, history, grammar, and traits of Russian and other Slavonic and Siberian and also, at the beginning of his career, African languages. Starting from his linguistic culture, in the research stream of cultural semiotics, Uspenskij devoted his studies to Russian history (cf. the works on Russian culture published with Lotman at the middle of the 1980s; Lotman and Uspenskij 1984, Lotman et al. 1985) and visual art (his study on the semiotics of Russian Icon is well-known; Uspenskij 1976).

In the last decade, numerous studies by him appeared in Russian. Several of them have then been translated into Polish (and other Slavic languages) and into Italian. It is for instance the case of *In regem unxit* (Uspenskij 2001a), a work on the rituals of the anointing of monarchs and its meaning, and of *Il segno della croce e lo spazio sacro* (Uspenskij 2005), a semiotic study of the different meanings of the sign of the cross in different Christian traditions. In recent years, in the realm of semiotics of visual art, Boris Uspenskij has mainly devoted his reflections to the study of Flemish Renaissance painting, particularly in relationship to Jan van Eyck's Ghent altarpiece, one of the most significant masterworks of that period and the most famous of van Eyck's works, which presents a complex and articulated semiotic structure and, as such, is an interesting example of exploitation of different formal and technical devices (particularly, different kinds of perspective) with a semiotic purpose, that is, with the goal of conveying a whole complex and articulated meaning (Uspenskij 2001b, 2010, 2012c). Recently some of his studies on the semiotics of Russian culture appeared in English in Uspenskij and Zhivov (2012). However, a consistent part of the whole production by Uspenskij is still not translated in English.

It is the case of *Ego loquens. Jazyk i kommunikacionnoe prostranstvo* ["Ego loquens. Language and communicational space"], a work devoted to the semiotics of communication. *Ego loquens* was published in 2007 (and reedited in 2012; cf. Uspenskij 2012a) in Russian. In 2008, its main conceptual core (the first chapter) was published in Italian as an article in a *collectanea* (Uspenskij 2008) and in 2012 the work has been translated in Serbian (cf. Uspenskij 2012b). So far, it never appeared in English and, therefore, it is little known by the international English-speaking community. This is a pity because *Ego loquens* is a very original work, in which Uspenskij highlights and describes some characteristics of language and its use as signs of ontological features of communication. It is a work that aims at shedding light on the foundations of communication and, by this means, also on the nature of human beings, since communication is, according to *Ego loquens*, the chief factor of human consciousness. Particularly, in the first chapter of the

book, deictic signs, and their use, are analyzed and thus reveal themselves as signs of an essential premise of human communication: the possibility for the communicants to share common experiences and perceptions and, therefore, to presuppose the existence of an objective reality. In this sense, *Ego loquens* is the summary of Uspenskij's reflections on the semiotics of communication.

As Uspenskij himself declares in the preface (2007: 7), the origins of this work are mainly to be traced back to a specific circumstance: from 1996 to 2001, Boris Uspenskij was professor of semiotics at the Faculty of Communication Sciences of the University of Lugano. In this context Uspenskij developed a framework (based on the consideration of language as the central semio-linguistic component of communication), in which some pragmatic aspects of language reveal the traces of the presupposition of the existence of an objective reality, shared by the participants to the communication (Mazzali-Lurati and Rigotti 2007). It is this presupposition – which, according to Uspenskij, is the greatest presupposition of human knowledge – that explains how the mysterious phenomenon of communication can take place. In the emergence of this presupposition deixis plays an essential role, which Uspenskij clarifies by considering how human beings use deictic signs, particularly personal pronouns, in dialogue.

Uspenskij defines communication as a mysterious phenomenon on the background of an essential paradox – which is at the center of dispute and debate among philosophers (cf. Hunter 2006) – a paradox we face when considering the fact that human beings actually communicate (and, generally speaking, do it effectively and successfully) in spite of a basic trait of human nature: human beings can only perceive and experience reality in a subjective way. “How is communication possible? On the one hand, every participant in the act of communication starts from his subjective perception of the objective reality, but, on the other hand, for the information exchange about reality (the surrounding world) to take place, subjective perception needs to be coordinated” (Uspenskij 2008: 109).¹

Human beings have a personal experience, based on individual impressions and associations. But the fact that they communicate presupposes the possibility of a common experience, deriving from the coordination of the different subjective perceptions; the fact that human beings communicate implies that they share a common experience. However, we cannot take for granted that my interlocutor

¹ I have translated quotations from *Ego loquens* into English according to the wording of the Italian translation. I am grateful to Prof. Edo Rigotti who helped me in translating passages of the original Russian text and in checking the correspondence of my translations from Italian to the original Russian text as well as the adequacy of direct references to it.

understands the words I use in the same way I understand them. In order to understand how communication is possible, we have to understand how human beings succeed in tallying their interpretations of the words (Uspenskij 2007: 11). “Clearly, a necessary condition for communication is a sort of agreement or compromise between the communicators” (Uspenskij 2008: 109).

More clearly stated, the problem is to know “[h]ow this agreement is achieved among speakers of a same language? From what does the coordination of the different individual experiences originate?” (Uspenskij 2008: 111; 2007: 12). The answer Uspenskij provides and develops in the first chapter of the book, clearly exposing the reasons and arguments at its basis, is that deictic words, and, more precisely, personal pronouns, play a decisive role: “[t]hese words really are the starting point of the process of coordination of the personal experiences, which makes communication possible” (Uspenskij 2008: 111; 2007: 12). The coordination of the individual subjective experiences into one common objective experience, on the basis of which communication can take place, is the use we normally make of personal pronouns. Following Benveniste and Jakobson, Uspenskij notes that personal pronouns, like proper names, differentiate from all other linguistic signs in that they do not have a fixed referent. More precisely, unlike proper names, they do not have a referent outside the communicative situation.

The word *I* designates an ACTUAL speaker in an ACTUAL act of discourse (“I” is who is speaking). On the contrary, *you* indicates a POTENTIAL speaker in an ACTUAL act of discourse (“you” is who may become the speaker of the ongoing dialogue). The pronouns *he*, *she*, *they*, if referred to human beings, indicate the POTENTIAL speaker in a POTENTIAL act of discourse (they are the ones who are outside the communicative situation at the ACTUAL moment, who are not taking part in the dialogue, but who, in principle, could become part of it). (Uspenskij 2008: 119; 2007: 17)

In a dialogue the participants constantly exchange their role: at each turntaking the speaker becomes a hearer, the hearer becomes a speaker and individuals that are outside the dialogue (but have maybe been the object of the dialogue between speaker and hearer) can enter it, becoming both and alternatively a hearer and a speaker. Because the hearer at a given turn of the dialogue refers to himself as “I,” the speaker recognizes to him his same communicative *status*. And, since the speaker perceives himself as a subject, he recognizes to the hearer the same status of subject (Uspenskij 2007: 20), that is, he attributes to the hearer the same existential and communicative *status* (Uspenskij 2008: 122).

Therefore, the pronouns *I* and *you* suppose the same existential status (i.e., the belonging to the same situation, and consequently to the same reality). In the same way, the pronouns *you* and *he* (or *she*), when the pronoun of the third person refers to a human being and not

to an inanimate object,² imply the same existential *status*, which is the *status* of potential participant to the communication: in this case the POSSIBILITY of belonging to the same situation is recognized. In this sense, the existential *status* of the person that indicates him/herself with the pronoun *I* is directly extended to the person defined with the pronoun *you*, and subsequently, in a mediated way, to the person indicated by the pronoun *he* (or *she*). (Uspenskij 2008: 144; 2007: 33–34)

Since the speaker attributes to the hearer the same status (the speaker assumes the hearer exists in the same way as the speaker himself), the speaker also attributes to the hearer the same perception of reality (the speaker assumes the hearer perceives reality in the same way as the speaker himself). The hearer does the same with respect to the speaker. In this way the agreement necessary for communication to take place is achieved (Uspenskij 2008: 144–145; 2007: 33–35). “Therefore, by using personal pronouns we – I and my interlocutor – postulate the existence of a common experience. The latter, on its turn, generates the idea of the objective existence of what different people perceive through their senses” (Uspenskij 2008: 145–146).

In *Ego loquens*, Uspenskij deals with verbal communication only, but within verbal communication he identifies and points out deixis, that is, the less linguistic of the components of verbal communication,³ as the key for the understanding of the nature of human communication (Mazzali-Lurati and Rigotti 2007). The central topic of *Ego loquens* is verbal communication and its problems (in the “Summary” the author declares that it addresses scholars in general linguistics as well as all those who are interested in understanding how language works), but the linguistic perspective of the work is exploited in order to deal with essential philosophical and semiotic problems of communication (2007: 7). Starting from the consideration of the characteristics of some linguistic elements and their use, in this work Uspenskij sheds light on the very nature of the mysterious

2 This remark may sound quite odd in English, since the pronouns *he* or *she* normally refer only to human beings, while in order to refer to inanimate objects the pronoun *it* must be used. However, this precise statement is important both in Uspenskij’s original Russian text and in its Italian translation, since both in Russian and in Italian the pronouns corresponding to *he* and *she* can be used to refer to human beings as well as to inanimate objects.

3 As Rigotti and Cigada remark when describing the factors of verbal communication, deixis “works in the encounter of language with experience . . . deixis works thanks to the interaction language/reality: it is a moment of language in which speaker and hearer use ‘the things that are around’ in order to produce meaning. With deixis we begin to understand that in verbal communication there are words, but not only words” (Rigotti and Cigada 2013: 49–50; translated by the author). We could say that deictic words are linguistic signs that entail a nonverbal component.

phenomenon of communication. In a way, *Ego loquens* is a significant exposition of Uspenskij's typical method of semiotic inquiry, a method that directly traces back to his scientific background and to the original semiotic approach of the Tartu-Moscow School, namely to the essential distinction between primary and secondary modeling systems: it is from the reflection on language that Uspenskij draws concepts, categories, useful comparisons and lines of interpretation for the semiotic study of culture. On the one hand, in his analyses and semiotic evaluations of various cultural events, behaviors, facts, and artifacts, Uspenskij's attention often focuses on relevant linguistic elements or linguistic uses, which work as evidence of the semiotic logic at the base of cultural texts.⁴ On the other hand, essential phenomena of verbal communication become categories and concepts Uspenskij uses in order to investigate nonverbal texts and forms of communication. It is the case of the category of point of view, which, for instance, becomes essential in the reconstruction of the grammar of the work of art, particularly of van Eyck's Ghent altar-piece (2001b, 2010, 2012c) and in his discussion of the meaning of the different Christian traditions related to the gesture of the Sign of the Cross (2005). It is also the case of the phenomenon of deixis, which is – as we exposed above – at the center of the discussion of *Ego loquens*.

In the face of claims asserting the need for semiotics to rid itself from linguistics by pointing out the risk of glottocentrism and logocentrism, this approach may appear limited. However, it is not. This method that takes language as an essential point of departure, allows Uspenskij to deal with numerous and various nonverbal phenomena and forms of communication, to detect their specificities, their particular logic and modality of signification. In this way Uspenskij succeeds in shedding light on facts and events that at first glance appear to be inherently confused, irrational and, therefore, inexplicable and irrelevant (cf. Di Salvo 1988: IX). This method allows him to reveal semiosis in numerous and various phenomena, to detect semiotic processes and devices, i.e. to carry out the “quest for meaning” that is the core of semiotics (Danesi 2007). This is the reason why we considered interesting and useful to dig deeper into such an approach and

⁴ Several examples of this procedure can be found in his essays on the semiotics of culture. Cf., for instance, the discussion on the semiotic value for the contemporaries of the epithets Peter The Great attributed to himself and the discussion on the meaning of the title of *zar* in relationship to the rituals of the anointing of monarchs (Uspenskij 1988: 5–6 and 2001), the study of the phenomenon of the imprecations against the mother, widespread in Russian linguistic behavior (Uspenskij 1988: 49–76) and the consideration of the association between dream and death in some Russian words in the discussion of the parallel between the perception of history and the experience of dream (Uspenskij 1988: 18).

we asked Uspenskij to develop these issues (semiotics of communication and methodology) in the following interview.

Professor Uspenskij, in 2007 appeared, in the Russian language, Ego Loquens, one of your recent and most comprehensive publications, which, as you declare in the preface, is based on the lectures you taught at the Faculty of Communication Sciences of the University of Lugano from its birth in 1996 to 2001. In this book you deal with the mysterious phenomenon of communication, trying to explain how communication is possible, notwithstanding a fundamental paradox: as human beings we perceive and experience reality in a subjective way, but in order to communicate we need to refer to a common perception and a common experience. In this work, as already the title suggests, you claim that the capability to speak is the constitutive aspect of human being and that Descartes' aphorisma "Cogito ergo sum" should be reformulated as "Communico ergo sum" or "Loquor ergo sum."

Could you explain why and what precisely does this mean? Why is communication and its understanding so essential?

Well, I mean, part of the response is implicitly given in your question because every human being has an individual experience, but in order to communicate human beings have to share their experience, to construct the idea of mutual experience and this mutual experience is constructed by the language we create and this language is the virtual image of the reality which surrounds us. So communication is the initial point, the point of departure, the initial stage of the building, of the construction of our idea of the existence.

Therefore, we, as human beings, can conceive ourselves, can become aware of ourselves, because we can communicate. As you showed in "Ego Loquens," the study of language and linguistic dialogue – particularly the analysis of how deictic signs (especially personal pronouns) are used by (and exchanged between) the participants to a dialogue – reveals the traces of the postulate of the existence of an objective reality, which is shared by the participants at communication, who begin by this way to conceive themselves as subjects thanks to language. Such a view assigns to communication the central place in the ontological core of human being. Is communication more characteristic of human being than thought, reasoning (to the point that we should say "Communico ergo sum" and not "Cogito ergo sum")?

Yes, I am inclined to believe so. Generally our thinking in many cases is an auto-communication. It would be risky to insist that human beings are reasonable, but certainly they are communicative. And usually it is the communication (the necessity of expression) that makes us thinking, not vice versa. Outside of communication our thinking is so primitive and amorphous that it can hardly be evaluated as thinking *sensu stricto*.

Which is the relationship between semiotics and the essential phenomenon of communication?

It depends on what do we intend by semiotics. For me semiotics is general linguistics. I mean, there is general linguistics as a scholarly discipline; then semiotics may be defined as general general linguistics, i. e. the most general linguistics; it is linguistics, but linguistics in the most general way. Since linguistics is the science of communication, then also semiotics is the science of communication. That I would think could be defined as Saussurian approach to communication.

Which contribution can semiotics bring to the understanding of communication? What's the use of semiotics?

Many years ago I wrote a book with the title *Poetics of composition*.⁵ I tried to analyze the principles of organization of a narrative text. And I draw some parallels between literary texts and visual arts. Later on I extrapolated this approach and I wrote some books on the principles of organization in the visual arts. One of my most recent books (which appeared in Italian translation in 2010) is on Van Eyck.⁶ So I introduced the term – I didn't invent it but I utilized the term – “point of view” and now I find very close approaches in linguistic investigation devoted to the analysis of ordinary language. The question of point of view, of course, is intrinsically connected with the organization of our discourse; for example the distinction between *theme* and *rheme* is a question of point of view, the use of articles is a question of point of view, the use of grammatical tense is a question of point of view. But in fiction we have some special kinds of point of view: one can trace a spatial point of view, a temporal point of view, a psychological point of view, an ideological point of view. In my book which I have mentioned (*Poetics of composition*) I tried to analyze different kinds of point of view. I started with the analysis of literature and visual arts, but now many linguists use a similar approach applied to the analysis of linguistic texts; particularly in Russia I would say (I would name two scholars: Jury Apresjan and Elena Paducheva). Of course, their approach is connected with the very precise analysis of language, much

5 Cf. Uspenskij 1973.

6 Cf. Uspenskij 2010. In this study of van Eyck's Ghent altarpiece, Uspenskij analyzes the different represented elements and correlates them with the spatial organization of the work as a whole. In this way, he explains how this masterpiece has to be read and reveals that, in it, some elements are represented according to a terrestrial perspective, while others are represented according to a celestial perspective (Uspenskij 2010: 2). The whole composition of this work is based on the connection and opposition between two different spatial planes: heaven and earth. Such a technique of composition makes it a sort of theological treaty (Uspenskij 2010: 67; cf. also Uspenskij 2012c).

more precise than I attempted to do in relation to literary texts because my aim was to create a typology of different possibilities; they are busy with precise descriptions of concrete languages. However, I think, this is can be an illustration of the relation between semiotics and linguistics. This could be a possible answer to the question “What’s the use of semiotics.”

The “more than general linguistics” you just described is like a general theory of communication.

Yes, it is metalinguistics.

... In respect to communication. So communication is the main topic of semiotics. Communication is the main topic of Saussurian semiotics, because Saussurian semiotics studies a sign as a part of communication, while Peircean semiotics is interested in a sign as special independent object.

But could we also use Peircean concepts to study communication? Is it useful?

There are two questions in your question.

Whether we can use the Peircean semiotics. But the Peircean semiotics being extremely ingenious is also very imprecise. Peirce was not responsible for that because he didn’t publish anything, or almost anything; he was not satisfied with what he had written. The details of his theory are not always clear, although he was a genius. But it is very difficult to use Peircean semiotics without a necessary interpretation. It should be interpreted in this or that way to be applied to a concrete object like communication. That’s one side of your question.

The other side is whether the semiotics that treats a sign as an independent phenomenon can be applied for the study of communication or not (not necessarily Peircean, but that kind of semiotics). Theoretically, yes, but there is no bridge between these two branches of semiotics. I mean, the bridge hasn’t been constructed yet.

Which could be this bridge and how could it be built? In your essay on the perception of time as a semiotic problem you approached this issue (Uspenskij 1988). In describing the communicative model of the historical process, you first pointed out the primary importance of the concept of language as a mechanism generating the utterances composing this process. This language selects the meaningful events and establishes links among them and it allows the expression (and the understanding) of the reaction of the members of a social collectivity to these events (Uspenskij 1988: 11). But subsequently you also pointed out the importance of the concept of sign: history is “first of all attribution of meaning to the past. . . The historical consciousness, in this sense, necessarily presupposes semiosis: therefore a

semiotic vision of history have to be based not only on the semiotics of language, but also on that of sign” (Uspenskij 1988: 12).

Actually this illustrates my point. The two approaches sometimes can be applied to the same material but they supplement each other. This is not an example of the bridge, this is an example of their complementarity. It is the material that unifies these approaches, not their intrinsic qualities.

What current semiotic research laments in respect to Saussure’s approach is the lack of consideration of the reference to reality (to the objects, to the referents) in the very structure of the sign. The reason is that such a concept of sign brings to a description of semiosis, which is purely cognitive and disconnected from reality. On the contrary, Peirce’s description of the sign as a triad include the referent as one of the essential elements that compose the sign (Randviir and Cogley 2009: 120). How does the consideration of reality enter in your approach to communication?

To my mind our notion of objective reality is a product of communication.⁷

⁷ In *Ego loquens*, particularly in the last paragraphs of chapter 1, this issue is addressed. There, Uspenskij maintains that language postulates an objective reality and can also determine the mental categorization of the objective reality (2008: 151). Through language and communication we create a virtual reality, which is in itself objective because it is superindividual but which is different from the objective reality; through this virtual reality we create concepts, we rationalize some ideas: we create a metalanguage for the interpretation of reality (2008: 151). Therefore, these concepts appear to be a subproduct of the linguistic activity and of communication. Referring to Benveniste, he develops this position by illustrating that “the very idea of personality, i.e., the representation of the self as a subject, is produced by language” (2008: 151). Indeed, a self is able to understand his existence (he becomes aware of it) only when facing another self, to which he relates through communication (2008: 152). The same can be said for the very idea of existence (2008: 154): it first appeared in some languages through the use of the copula without a predicative complement, this use conferring to the verb “to be” the autonomous and full meaning of existence (2008: 155–156). Both the idea of the self and the idea of existence are properties that God possesses in an absolute manner: God, the absolute subject (who he is not contrasted to another subject), exists in an absolute sense (2008: 153). This is clearly illustrated by the name through which God defines himself in the Exodus: “I am who I am.” But this is a concept that holds in very different cultural traditions (cf. the Upanisad, where the world is described as a person that creates a semiotic description of his existence; 2008: 153). “In this way, it appears that both the concept of God and the concept of existence represent the result of linguistic activity (i.e., of a mental reelaboration of linguistic structures)” (2008: 157). However, Uspenskij continues, “[b]y stating this we do not intend to maintain that the content of these concepts does not go beyond the virtual reality . . .” (2008: 157). But this allows us to explain why and how we can discuss and speak about these topics even if we do not share the same experience of them. For instance, both religious people and atheists can discuss about God and his existence thanks to the reference to a common concept of God created by language and not by their metaphysical, mystic experience, which is fundamentally individual (2008: 157).

So the main contribution semiotics can bring to the understanding of communication is the Saussurian approach.

If we speak about communication, certainly yes, because the Saussurian approach is a linguistic approach; I mean, he was interested in communication in all kind of languages as tools of communication, while Peirce was a mathematician, a logician; he was not so much interested in communication as a phenomenon.

Also the categories, the tools, and methods . . . Which semiotic tools and methods can be useful in the study of this essential phenomenon?

I am afraid, this is a problem, because semiotics doesn't have an elaborated methodology; which means that when we apply semiotic methods, we are basing on an analogy, on an analogy with natural language.

In your answer emerges the fundamental approach of the Tartu-Moscow School. The isomorphism between language and culture (owing to which culture is a secondary modeling system based on the first modeling system, which is language) defines the essential perspective, the basic framework for semiotic research. The source for semiotic tools and methods is this analogy with language.

Yes, I think so.

The Tartu-Moscow School published books with the title *Investigation in the Secondary modeling systems*. The idea was that the first modeling system was linguistic system, so all kind of analogy with the linguistic system can be useful to understand more complex phenomena. But I have to say that this term ("secondary modeling system") was invented in order to deceive the Soviet government, because when we initiated semiotic studies, semiotics was not acknowledged as an object of study: the ideologists of Marxism said (and they were absolutely right) that semiotics has nothing to do with Marxism. So we had to invent something enigmatic to deceive them. It sounded scientific.

Would you now, being the ideological context completely changed and so not having to meet this need of deceiving Marxists, propose a more appropriate term for the concept? Why?

No, I wouldn't. But now I would explain it in more explicit terms.

What is the sense of semiotic research?

In various fields of culture very often we can see the same mechanisms that are very clear in language. I mean, the sense is not to describe something in the semiotic terms, but to see the deep semiotic structure of different phenomena, to discover signs, to discover semiotic nature of the studied phenomena.

And therefore also to discover meaning?

To discover meaning, of course, yes.

That's why we (when I say "we" I mean representatives of Tartu-Moscow School) were interested in very different scholarly disciplines. These were disciplines of the humanities, I mean study of language, study of literature, study of visual art, study of history. These disciplines are united because all of them have semiotic nature. This enables us to write books on visual art, on literary criticism, on history and so on.

The semiotic nature of a literary text or of ordinary discourse or of a painting is quite clear, but in which sense can we speak of semiotic nature of history?

History is a very complex object of investigation, we can approach history from different angles. One can try to study objective laws of history (probably there are these objective laws). But the semiotic approach starts from the presumption that the important thing in the development of events is not only that objective law (for example economic development or struggle for power), but also the perception of various events in the cultural code of the given epoch. Indeed people react to certain events departing from their understanding of these events, and their understanding can be very different from the ideas of historians. I mean if people thought that thunder is divine voice, probably we do not agree with that, but the important thing is what they thought, not what we think about this. Because it was their perception that caused their reaction, which made them act in this or that way. This is the semiotic approach because we have to describe the meaning which they ascribe to events; we have to discover, to reconstruct the cultural code of the people who existed thousand years ago for example in a very far part from Europe.

Maria Cristina Gatti (2003) described Lotman's and your research as "practices of semiotic analysis" because you use semiotic concepts and categories in order to discover and reveal the sense of given precise phenomena, which are always seen in a precise context – a given cultural context or a given type of communication, verbal, non-verbal, natural dialogue, arts, etc. (I am thinking for instance to your work on the semiotics of communication and the role of deixis in it, of which we spoke before; the works on the communication in literary texts and in figurative arts – particularly, the icon and the Ghent altar piece; the study of other given cultural phenomena, such as the conception of Europe, Peter the First's reforms, the sign of the cross, the titles of the sovereigns). You yourself maintained this approach as specific of the semiotic researches of the Tartu-Moscow School, which "always are in some ways connected with the analysis of concrete cultural texts, that is, they always have in the end, an interpretive character," then specifying that the elabora-

tion of an abstract methodology of semiotic analysis does not enter the main interests of the School (Uspenskij 1996: 15; translated by the author). But – you already answered a little bit before, but maybe we can go deeper in this – in order to carry out a practice of analysis, a theory – a good theory – is necessary. So we need to build up a theory.

I don't think that a general elaborated theory can be useful in these cases, because the objects of analysis are very different in different cases. In all the cases we start from the analogy with our linguistic experience, with the language, but the concrete application is very different. There are many attempts to build up a semiotic theory, but it is not always clear why we should have a special theory; I mean, only the application of the theory can justify the existence of the theory in question and the applications are very different. There is the basis of linguistics and there are different ways of extrapolating this linguistic approach, different ways. But I don't think that a unique theory of extrapolation can be constructed.

So the extrapolation varies according to the phenomenon.

Exactly.

And the test for a good theory is its application.

Yes. I personally try to use the minimum of semiotic terms. The modality is semiotic, but it doesn't mean that the phenomena that I describe should be necessarily expressed in this way.

Why?

Because I try to say something about an object of my study that could be useful not only for semioticians, but for the specialists in that object. That's my aim, that's what I attempt, what I try to do.

Because the semiotic understanding of a phenomenon has to be useful not only for semiotics.

Not only for semiotics. Absolutely not. I would say in the first place not for semioticians, in the first place for the students of the object in question.

So for instance the understanding of van Eyck (the topic of your last book) has to be useful for the students in . . .

I mean a student of van Eyck can use it without knowing anything about semiotics, because I don't use semiotic terms and this is my strategy, not only in this case.

Does this mean that semiotics is inherently interdisciplinary? In your essay on the genesis of the Tartu-Moscow School you wrote that in your works “semiotics reveals itself as a kind of nodal science that connected different fields of the humanities” (1996: 13; translated by the author). In what exactly does this interdisciplinarity consist?

Semiotics as a branch of knowledge is directed to reveal the semiotic nature of various phenomena and to demonstrate their intrinsic affinity. These phenomena may be objects of study of different disciplines. In this sense semiotics can be acknowledged as an interdisciplinary approach.

And which suggestions would you give to a young researcher who wants to tackle the study of culture and communication stemming from texts? What is important to take into consideration when starting such a study?

I would suggest to read various things about various cultures; I mean, to try to realize how different cultures are. For example, I think it is very useful, even if you are not going to become a specialist in this field, to read books in cultural anthropology. Just as it is very useful for linguists to read grammars of various languages, even if you are not going to become a specialist in these languages: it is useful to understand that different languages are constructed in very different ways. And the human thinking is crystalized in the language, in many various unpredictable ways (probably predictable, but we don't yet know how). The same with cultures. So I think it is very important not to be cultural imperialists, not to impose your own cultural concept on other cultures. It is not only a question of democracy: it is a question of honesty, because people think in different ways and it is important to understand how they think.

So we can say that intercultural communication is one emergent field for semiotics? Yes, I think so.

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Bionote

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