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SEMIOTICS AS A METHOD OF THE HUMANITIES STUDIES

Ключові слова: *семіотика, структуралізм, школа Лотмана, семіотичний метод, текст, код.*

**Сахновський Євген. СЕМІОТИКА ЯК МЕТОД
ГУМАНІТАРНИХ НАУК.**

У статті представлений стан російської семіотики „після Лотмана”. Наголошено на пріоритеті методу в концепції її засновника. Презумпція захищеності тексту передбачає пошуки коду як шляху до його розгадки.

Some years ago a prominent linguist, Rebecca Frumkina profoundly grounded her own attention-grabbing insights on Humanities' specific features as compared to Natural Science in a series of articles, describing the state of post-Soviet linguistics. It turns out that “it is the Humanities that chiefly discuss only the findings (*author lays the stress*) of completed, distracted comprehension and in rare cases – the procedure in the process of which the knowledge was obtained”¹. Naturally, after considering abovementioned findings of a well-known and highly respected linguist, representing the most developed branch of the humanities, I cannot but agree. Of peculiar interest is those scarce and little known works, being referred to by R.Frumkina, who emphasized on them as the exclusion from a general methodological infantilism situation. This article enumerates mainly Russian researches², who until recently, have represented a highly established Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School. Noteworthy, it is usually associated among competent readers with the name of Yuri Mykhailovych Lotman (1922-1993), eminent scholar in literature, study of culture, critical-thinking innovator in methodology of the humanities. From traditional philology Lotman shifted in the early sixties to cultural semiotics.

The founder of once “strange and alien for the Soviet people” semiotics is now devoted to dozens of works, making up if ironically apply Soviet coinage term, Lotmaniada (Lotmanmania). In truth, the number of publications included it in the conventional (printed) and electronic versions, just amazing. Recently, a super modern literary periodical has started to even “Fight with Lotman's shadow (impact).” But let's shed the light on that matter later.

The aforesaid R. Frumkina's semiotic priorities combined with Lotmanmania boom “after Lotman's passing away” paradoxically coincide in time with attempts to strictly argue semiotics both in Russia and overseas. What is more absurd, in the mid 90's a philosopher John Stuart tried to grant “a death certificate” to semiotics having predicted “post-semiotic communication philosophy”³. Having started the dispute concerning this problem by rising a rhetorical question, “Is semiotics deceased?”, the author of a critical review in the Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS) sarcastically argued, “The cemetery of the twentieth century's ideas is constantly replenishing: besides God, the author, modernity..., structuralism, Marxism, history and art, having been buried so far, a new burial has been announced. This time it is turn of semiotics”⁴. Yet another notice, as it was unmistakably disclosed in the aforementioned survey proved to be premature. Semiotics is “still alive” and it is constantly developing simultaneously in several directions in the West.

On the contrary, the situation “after Lotman's death” in Russia was developing in quite different direction. In the early 90's Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School celebrated its 20th anniversary. Regrettably, by the time of the anniversary symposium was published⁵, its founder Yu. Lotman had already passed away. Paying a tribute, compilers and authors, summarized and outlined the prospects for further scientific research in the post-Soviet intellectual space. But soon it turned out that the latter is a mere tribute to the tradition. No sooner had two post-jubilee years passed then there appeared a statement on the “explicit simulation of research activities under the pretext of regarding Tartu school.” Hence, the conclusion

was drawn that semiotics “died away with Lotman’s demise”⁶. Recurring attempts to refute this disappointing forecast proved to be futile: so, according to V. Rosin, restoring of the “competitive version of the Russian semiotics”⁷ did not succeed at all.

In the late twentieth century an illogical situation dating back to 70s emerged. At that time, the semiotic school headed by Yu. Lotman remained, according to Mary Zubrycka, “a sort of island of the humanitarian thought of freedom on the background of the general Marxist theory dominance in universities and academic institutions of the former USSR”⁸. Without being officially prohibited, albeit simultaneously not recognized on the proper level, semiotics was effectively perceived in the West. This process was facilitated by the appearance of Yu. Lotman’s works, translated into European languages and even Japanese, as well as his creative activities research done 20 years earlier⁹, if compared with Russia¹⁰. Consequently, as the result of such imbalance while Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School’s intellectual works were abundantly presented and successfully mastered in the West¹¹, but in the post-Soviet scientific environment they are still the property of a close circle of intellectuals, mostly literary scholars and philosophers. Some of them cherish the illusion that research in “semiotics is completely done”¹², while the others are still enthusiastically debating on its status and opportunities of application¹³. It should be stated that for a wide circle of the humanities experts, semiotics is still unknown, or for whatever reason is incomprehensible – a sort of “intellectual luxury”, philosophical “out-of-season vegetable”¹⁴.

The Western critics’ forecasts regarding the status and prospects of the Russian semiotics are more optimistic in terms of its widespread use. The German sociologist Christa Ebert asserts that “the apogee of cultural studies method”, embodied both in “Works on Sign Systems” and in summer school in Tartu in the 60’s and 70’s, by all means, has already faded away¹⁵. Furthermore, the scholar indicates the more important objective circumstances in addition to Lotman’s utterly personal factor (his impact is really hard to overestimate). It concerns primarily dramatic changes in the humanities epistemology: at the turn of the 19th-21st centuries, the humanities development is closely associated not only with the emergence of the-then revolutionary new concepts (undoubtedly it was structuralism, semiotics, deconstructivism), but as well with an effectiveness of the applied methods. According to K. Ebert, that is the peculiar prospect for semiotics, forecast by the journal “New Literary

Review”, initiating in 2002 a series of publications on ‘Fight with Lotman’s shadow’¹⁶. To put it plainly, applied largely in literature studies semiotic method was mentioned to be put into practice in other fields of humanities.

The above reasoning is quite appropriate, their further application, however, requires some further explication and a brief retrospective into history.

Semiotics fundamental principles are profoundly disclosed in the works of an American Lecturer in logic, Charles Peirce (1839-1914) and a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), by whom its main trends were genetically initiated. In the interwar period semiotics developed mainly in Moscow and Prague Linguistic Schools. Significantly, after the World War II semiotics was molded as a separate interdisciplinary field. Shortly after that an Italian semiotician, essayist, philosopher and literary critic Umberto Eco mentioned that in the 60’s an accord and harmony of the European academic world was shaken by the words “semiotics” and “structuralism”¹⁷. Simultaneously the semiotic school in the USSR was established (and conferences held in Moscow and Tartu in 1962 and 1964 respectively), although it should be noted that high-rank officials of Soviet coined Marxism took this event, to put it mildly, for granted (without any enthusiasm). The-then domineering ideology ardent adherents seemed to treat above-mentioned “troublemakers” equally baffling and senseless. But semiotician Yu. Lotman’s position concerning Marxist philosophy was rather peculiar, he established himself neither its supporter nor its opponent, instead as a scholar and philologist advocating Saussure’s semiotic ideas and principles, and in terms of methodology – Lotman recognized structuralism, according to M. Gasparov, as the best form of rational scientism of the twentieth century”¹⁸.

Yu. Lotman’s linguistic priorities are sure to have influenced Tartu-Moscow school research, majoring in literary and linguistic subjects. Noteworthy, structuralism altogether claims the status of the humanities (textual) disciplines methodology. Therefore, the scope of semiotic research gradually expanded, covering culture in the broadest sense. Modernist semiotics is an interdisciplinary science dealing with signs, communication and systems as the objects of study. Obviously, traditionally established themes also engaged psychological, social, visual themes¹⁹. Every now and then there are various proposals of turning semiotics into a sophisticated and integrated understanding of the target (meta-) science content – a sort of target (meta-) logic or target

linguistics. Nevertheless, such attempts make perception of the main provisions of this extremely difficult discipline more complicated. Consequently without any deeper and more thorough study of semiotic category and its current status, we'll restrict the study only by the study of semiotic method and its use possibilities in the humanitarian research.

The topicality of choosing this subject is twofold: on the one hand, it is accounted for Lotman's methodological priorities, and on the other hand – for the limited range of that method application. The latter lies either in elementary ignorance of its nature, or in total awareness, resulting in the fact that semiotic research is ostensibly justified only from the point of the global historical and cultural processes view, rather than individual stories. In particular, “historical semiotics is categorically stated to be very effective in the culture analysis on the whole, when comparing different cultures or stages of their development, and it happens to be fruitless in the case of a particular historical analysis”²⁰. To our strong conviction this statement is too categorical, in fact – false. But, let's primarily focus more on the semiotic method.

Y. Lotman himself singled out three aspects in the course of semiotics study in late twentieth century. Firstly, semiotics, as having already been defined by F. de Saussure before, is a scientific discipline encompassing entire scope of symbolic communication. Next stands aspect that “is best defined as researcher's original scientific psychology, his cognitive mind-consciousness”²¹. As a final point, the last aspect should be disclosed. Yu. Lotman pursued the argument on the idea that semiotics, “appears to be a cognitive method (*author lays the stress*) of the humanities, pervading the various disciplines and is not determined by the nature of the object but by the method of its analysis”²². Lotman's approach cannot be understood without taking into consideration the central importance of the analysis, determining the humanities essence as textual ones by its definition. A text is “not a reality, but the material for its (interpretation) reproduction. Therefore, semiotic analysis of the document must always precede the historical one”, cognition of the rules of the reality reproduced according to the text – might precede reproduction itself”²³.

In defense of Lotman's method of semiotic concepts, sociologist Christa Ebert²⁴ points out to its priority, summing up its feature as follows, “It is not a statement, but a set of rules implying it, that is the subject of the study, what respectively politicians and ideologists have tried to disguise by euphemistic rhetoric”²⁵. What is referred to “a

set of rules”, Lotman himself calls the “code”, that is, to his deep conviction, the clue to decoding of the text. In one fairly exceptional case, the author of the Ukrainian-language article states, “Recognizing an object as a text, we thus assume that it might be encrypted, since coding presumption implies the notion of the text. But the code itself is unknown – it is to be decoded on the basis of this text”²⁶. The body of another work goes on to discuss the problem of the code priority imperatively, “The text is always made by someone with some purpose, and the event appears to be coded. Everything considered, a historian is to take a part of a decoder”²⁷. In this context the author appeals to a historian, since the latter analyzes the problem of a historical event. Taken as a whole, however, it is a mere paradigm of the general semiotic strategy. “The textual message relevance to the code, – Lotman emphasized, is one of the key semiotics problems, since the message to be sent and received, should be properly encoded and decoded. It's absolutely obvious and understandable...”²⁸.

It should be noted that the stress on *semiotic analysis* priority does not testify to its absolutization, inasmuch as “one and the same scientific objective presupposes both semiotic and non-semiotic approach”²⁹. Yet, the very fact that semiotic priority is a crucial field of research the founders of Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School (except Lotman, let's say B.A. Uspenskyi, B.M. Gasparov, V.N. Toporov) emphasized on. In the process of the rules setting to copy precisely the original text and resort to the constructs of language of reality interpretation, of particular importance was the system of extra-textual relations, universal and situational context, without its rendering a text can not be comprehended adequately. To recapitulate, before investigating what author (or authors) implies and largely is convinced in, a reader should be questioned why the text is presented in such a fashion that the core information is held back.

Making decoding of operating (description and prescription) logic of a text a priority is nothing but a challenge to methodologically develop the idea of an eminent sociologist Pierre Bourdieu on “narrative as a means of social reality constructing”³⁰.

Naturally, finding the code (decoding) of any text is the task far from being plain, in each case relatively this undertaking is explicit, consequently methodologically justified. The previous extra-textual analysis turned out to be rather fruitful: if compared with utterly expressed message, backward significance is fairly exciting. In addition in pre-modern time, “comprehensible”

texts are scarce in a hierarchically ordered society. Regarding this problem, Yu. Lotman asserts: "Various social and historical groups in their fight for information, eventually aspire its monopolization. In terms of applied means, they range between secret texts and secret codes ("a secret language" of different age and social groups; hidden religious, political and professional significance), thus generate misinforming and misleading³¹.

The latter is found to be extremely difficult for decoding, since such texts (of political, propagandistic, and ideological context), are certainly figured on a specified target audience with pre-given purpose. Their authors, according to Lotman's terminology, "subjects of the system" are particularly creative and heuristic while selecting the facts, but also – what is more important – while compiling them. Therefore, distortion of reality inherent for a text, one "should add ideological coding, which is the highest hierarchical level of narrative, including genre, ideological, political, social, religious, philosophical and other codes"³².

Drawing the conclusion of incomplete overview of semiotics and more scrutinized, though incomprehensive analysis of the semiotic method, we should articulate on the complexity of this subject, formed in specific, virtually – in semi-legal conditions. One can find it quite formidable to learn both its method, and even more – its direct application. Does the present-day Humanities' expert, however, have another way to overcome compiling stage, methodological infantilism and methodical cliché? The question might sound rhetorical.

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Сахновський Євгеній. СЕМИОТИКА КАК МЕТОД ГУМАНИТАРНЫХ НАУК.

В статье представлено состояние российской семиотики „после Лотмана”. Сделан акцент на приоритете метода в концепции ее основателя. Презумпция зашифрованности текста предполагает поиски кода как пути к его разгадке.

Ключевые слова: семиотика, структурализм, школа Лотмана, семиотический метод, текст, код.

Sakhnovskiy Eugeniĭ. SEMIOTIQUE COMME UNE METHODE DES SCIENCES HUMAINES.

Dans l'article sur l'état de la sémiotique russe d'après Lotman il s'agit de la méthode de la priorité dans le concept de son fondateur. La présomption du chiffrement du code de recherche du texte fournit un moyen de le dénouer.

Termes clés: sémiotique, structuralisme, école de Lotman, méthode sémiotique, code, texte.