

## Steps towards a Systemic Semiotics

Mirko Lampis

*University "Constantine the Philosopher" of Nitra*

**Abstract:** The goal of this paper is to introduce a new perspective for semiotic studies. Thanks to the theoretical and interpretative guidelines of that general cognitive paradigm called today *systemic* (or *relational*, or *complex*) *thinking*, and thanks also to the existence of semiotic theories that already propose a systemic approach, as Lotman's semiotics of culture, we can try to rework and reorganize the main explanatory notions of contemporary semiotics, specially the notions of *knowledge*, *meaning*, *communication*, *text* and *culture*.

**Key words:** systemic semiotics, knowledge, meaning, communication, text, culture.

There is no single semiotics, but an archipelago or constellation of studies with different trends, an interdisciplinary field integrated by paradigms that use different methodologies, renew different traditions, prefer different explanatory notions and are directed to different, more or less extensive and articulated, research domains. This is the principal reason why in semiotics there is a proliferation of names and designations, a proliferation that we can recognize also in the name of the discipline (semiotics or semiology? Maybe semeiotics?) and that leads to the employment of different morphosyntactic resources: adjectival constructions (structural, interpretative, cognitive, existential semiotics, etc.), constructions with prefixes (socio-semiotics, zoo-semiotics, bio-semiotics, etc.) and prepositional constructions (semiotics of literature, theater, sports, etc.).

There is, rather, a general "mission" that justifies the existence of the semiotics as a scientific discipline: the study of meaning and communicative processes. But even this "mission" is not free of oscillations and ambiguities. Some semiotics focus mainly on the processes of meaning and other mainly on the communication, but anyway the notions of "meaning" and "communication" (as all other technical notions: "sign", "code", "semiosis", "structure", "text", "discourse", "culture", etc.) have no single definition valid for every specialist. Of course, this big fragmentation and variety of the "semiotic landscape" creates some disciplinary and institutional problems (what does semiotics do?, what are its goals and methods?, what are its limits?), but on the other hand it gives our discipline a remarkable theoretical ductility and explanatory vivacity.

One of the most influential semiotics in the last decades, from the seventies to the present day, is Semiotics of Culture, a semiotic school based in the theoretical and analytical work of the Russian researcher Jurij M. Lotman (1922-1993)<sup>128</sup>. Regarding the great explanatory power and ductility of Lotman's semiotics, we maintain the thesis that it's due also to the fact that Lotman was able to express, in semiotic terms, a series of scientific matters with a very general relevance.

In Lotman's papers and essays we find two kinds of theoretical legacy: on the one hand, many themes and motifs from Russian formalism and Czech structuralism; on the other hand, a big interest in disciplines such as Cybernetics, Neurobiology and Physics of dynamic systems far from equilibrium (the physics of Nobel Prize Ilya Prigogine). Lotman perceived the deep theoretical analogies that connected all these scientific paradigms with his own practice as a researcher of literature and culture, so that his conception of the textual and cultural processes and his constant interdisciplinary frequentations ended up influencing themselves mutually and recursively.

In this sense, we can conclude that Lotman's semiotics, just like Prigogine's physics, Maturana and Varela's biology, Gregory Bateson's cybernetic or Even-Zohar's Polysystem theory, in its most essential and innovative lines was part of a general epistemology named today *systemic (or relational, or complex) thinking*, an alternative way of understanding (and organizing) the knowledge that defends, against every

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<sup>128</sup> About the Lotman's life and work, see Cáceres Sánchez 1996; about the contemporary relevance of Lotman's semiotics, see Sedda 2012.

reductionist and atomistic practice, a holistic, ecological and integrator vision of the observed phenomena (see Capra 1996).

We have dedicated several studies to the systemic dimension of Lotman's Semiotics of Culture (Lampis 2010, 2013a, 2014), and we would like to introduce here the next step: the idea of writing a treatise with the goal of "re-read" and "re-organize" the semiotic theory around the fundamental explanatory/interpretative principles of systemic thinking; the following principles:

- the research is dedicated to the study of totalities (systems, fields, domains), integrated sets of relations that define, globally, relevant objects, operations and processes;

- the elements of an integrated system interact constantly and recursively between them and generate a global behavior (high level behavior) that influences and determines the operation and drift of each element;

- the objects and phenomena studied by the experimental and theoretical research *are* integrated sets of relations whose borders change (whose identification changes) according to the considered relations; moreover, these objects and phenomena *participate* in networks of relations and their value for the research depends precisely on the concrete relations in which they participate;

- the relations studied by the research are dynamic relations, relations that change over the time and according to the boundary conditions; they are, in other words, historical processes;

- the pattern of internal relations that identifies a system is the *organization* of that system; in other words, we understand the organization as a set of relations without which the system would not exist or would not be recognized;

- the researcher-descriptor is never an external element to the network that describes; his activity is an integral part of the relational domain, and therefore it helps to delimit, ratify or rectify the relations that identify and define the system (its organization);

- the researcher-descriptor cannot know an objective reality independent of what he is and what he does: every knowledge depends on the structural and operational legality of the knowing subject, legality determined by his organic, relational and social drift.

These principles marked and still mark the work of many scientists in different research areas: ecology, psychology (from Gestalt psychology to modern systemic psychology), cybernetics, General Systems Theory, physics of dissipative structures, biology of knowledge, neurobiology, evolutionary biology, Artificial Intelligence, philosophy, sociology and literary and cultural study; they are also the principles that guided us in the coordination of Maturana and Varela's theories about knowledge, Eco's theories about interpretative processes and Lotman's theories about textuality and culture with the goal to enunciate and describe an integrated systemic semiotics<sup>129</sup>.

Our research, developed primarily in Spanish, finally led to publication of a book titled *Tratado de semiótica sistémica* ("Treatise on systemic semiotics", Lampis 2013b), a book composed by 363 short texts, notes or "aphorisms" progressively numbered and grouped into five main thematic areas: 1-Knowledge (59 "aphorisms"); 2-Meaning (76); 3-Communication (65); 4-Textuality (90); 5-Culture (73)<sup>130</sup>.

With this treatise, regardless of more immediate formal models<sup>131</sup>, what we wanted to achieve was to get a coherent synthesis that could make explicit the systemic "vocation" and possibilities of contemporary semiotics; we wanted also to illustrate, by the same structure of the work, the kind of textual organization that justifies the delineated explanation (or, if one prefers, the kind of textual organization to which the delineated explanation leads), so it's legitimate argument that the treatise is configured, ultimately, as a work of applied... theoretical semiotics.

To summarize our perspective, we consider it appropriate to offer a small but significant sample of our "aphorisms". In this way, we hope to introduce the reader into the breadth and complexity of the investigated issues.

## Knowledge

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<sup>129</sup> Together with the work of Lotman, Eco, Maturana and Varela, we must mention also the rhizomatic thinking of Deleuze and Guattari (1980), the archaeological theory of Foucault (1969) and the "behavioral" semiotics of Morris (1971).

<sup>130</sup> The book also includes a glossary, a section with explanatory diagrams and other with relevant textual quotations.

<sup>131</sup> For example, Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logicus-philosophicus* or Umberto Eco's *Trattato di semiotica generale*

1. The knowledge is an operational relation between the living being (the knowing subject) and the domain of existence in which he operates (the known reality).

1.1. The living beings are autopoietic systems (self-producing systems); in other words, the systemic organization that defines the living beings is the autopoietic organization.

1.1.1.4 Borders of a system vary (move, expand or shrink) according to the systemic relations or integrative processes that we consider.

1.2. The operability is the set of conditions relating to the action of a system and to interaction processes in which it participates without losing its integrity (the organization that defines it).

1.2.3. Living beings do not create or manipulate internal representations, models or schemes of their domains of existence, but these domains emerge from their own cognitive activity.

1.3.1.3. The habituation is a process that forms, from the intensity, occurrence and recurrence of specific interactions, a stable connectivity patterns in the plastic structures of the system. This process depends on the relations that link the activity of the system's structures (internal perturbations and constraints) and also on the coupling dynamics that system as an integrated unit maintains with its operational domain (external perturbations and constraints).

1.3.4. When two or more living beings interact recursively between them and perform their autopoietic organization due to their mutual interaction, we talk of social coupling.

## **Meaning**

2. The meaning comes with the life: it's a specific operational concretion in the coupling domain of the living being. In other words, it's an operational relation between the living being and a specific perturbation or event: the relation that is established when this perturbation or event triggers a change in the structures in coupling of the living being while he operates and derives performing his autopoietic organization.

2.1.2.6. The cognitive (and mnemonic) activity of the organism in relation to a specific coupling domain is named attention (or care). In the case of cognitive relations and coupling domains multilayered, with different operational dimensions, the attention

establishes (or selects) a specific field of pertinence, a relevant reality, a preferred way of interaction.

2.2. An expression is a pertinent event (or change) in the knowledge's flux.

2.3.1. The semiosis is the process by which determinate expressions become relevant, enter in correlation and are organized in a domain of knowledge in which the meaning of each expression depends not on a lineal operational relation, but on an intricate web of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic relations.

2.3.4.5. We need a special attention, a special care to understand and follow so many private and public, intensional and extensional, hypo- and hyper-encoded, connotative and denotative, metaphoric and lexicalized connections, a care that occurs, in fact, only in certain analytical contexts or, with more frequency and less pretensions, when the interpretative or communicative coordination fails and it's necessary to disambiguate the meaning or negotiate it (in other words, when we must operate by trans-coding).

2.3.5. The interpretation is a cognitive operation by which we recognize, establish or choose a particular signifying correlation or an organized set of correlations among those that integrate a semiotic domain.

2.3.6.1. The abduction, in the absence of prior coding or in the case of ambiguous coding, establishes a viable signifying correlation from the context of observation and the available knowledge. In this sense, every trans-coding or creative process is an abductive process. In this sense, every semiotic knowledge always is, or has been, an abductive knowledge.

## **Communication**

3. Communication is defined as a process of behavioral coordination between the members of a social domain.

3.1.1.1. The communication act (the behavioral pattern that defines it) is not individual or unidirectional. Classical and linear communication schemes, such as "sender→ (message)→ receiver", are inadequate and should be revised in the direction of a greater multiversality: "knowing subjects→ (expressions) ←knowing subjects".

3.1.1.5. When, despite the interactional dance, behavioral coordination does not occur, we talk of frustrated communication.

3.2. A language is an organized set of communication habits.

3.2.2. The activity in the language is the activity of a system that integrates itself and participates in a domain of communicative coupling.

3.3.1.1. To talk, to communicate orally, we must learn to recognize and produce, in the course of communicative interactions, determinate phonic sequences whose pertinence and meaning depend on behavioral, cognitive and linguistic coordination that organizes the communicative domain.

3.3.4.3. The conversation also implies the emergence of “immoral” behaviors because what has been said, what has been known and what has been encoded are called again into play in the process of their integration with the memory and creativity of different subjects that interact and derive in conversation.

## **Textuality**

4. A text is an integrated set of expressions to which we assign, or in which we recognize, a particular signifying organization.

4.1.1.4. In general terms, texts and interpreters create and define themselves mutually and recursively: on the one hand, the activation of textual meanings depends on the cognitive habits of the interpreters; on the other hand, those same habits are formed by the learning and practice with (and by) the texts.

4.2.1. The intertextuality is the set of (genetic and interpretative) relations that are established between the texts, that define the different types of texts, that determine if something is a text.

4.3.1. The term “art”, according to a very general sense, can be applied to any organized repertoire of habits (and techniques) of textual production, provided that in this repertoire there are integrated also one or more canonization systems of the produced texts.

4.4. There are textual domains whose interpretative processes are aimed to produce an explanation of the text that can define, in a valid and verifiable inter-subjectively way, the conditions of existence and operation of the text in the domain in which the observation occurs. They are defined as scientific domains.

## Culture

5. The culture is the domain (space and time) in which all semiotic processes (signifying, communicative and textual processes by which we humans perform our social and autopoietic organization) are generated, integrated and derive.

5.1.1.6. We humans are cultural beings because our lineage, our history and our environment are culturally organized. In other words, we play the game because we came from it and because we are born among big and tough gamers. We dance in conversation because the dance justifies our existence and because the others have their own rhythms. We have no choice. We cannot deny or escape from who we are.

5.1.4.2. The emergence of the semiosis involved a greater complexity of the meaning and, therefore, of the relation that the knowing subjects maintain with their environment, with the others and with themselves. The resulting syntactic, semantic and pragmatic fluctuations and diversifications increased the importance of conversational interactions and implicated a general reorganization of the operational, expressive and social habits.

5.2. The cultural organization concerns the relations that link the persons to the others, their environment and their circumstances. From social and communicative contacts are generated, recursively, certain shared (consensual) interpretations and descriptions and from these are generated new operational coherences that transform (and "mold") the conversational and cognitive networks.

5.2.3. Every culture is constituted as an integrated domain of textual productions, circulations and interpretations.

5.3.2. The validation is the process by which an interpretation (some encyclopedic relation) is recognized and defended as correct (or true) by the community of interpreters.

5.3.5.4. The exemplary personalities, the saints, the heroes, are a singularity or anomaly; the same attribution of distinctive features as the sanctity or heroism is, first of all, a matter of interpretation (if not of fanaticism, aberrant interpretation). No one should be a saint or a hero, but all of us, without exception and according to our limits and

possibilities, have to decide how we can participate in intelligence interactions and interpretations. The rest is maybe silence; surely it's memory.

Well then, it's evident that the treatise is only a short exploratory text and its conciseness (or syntheticity) sometimes borders (and maybe exceeds) the limits provided for a proper and rigorous scientific work. This is the price, so to speak, we have to pay to emphasize the strong systemic, relational and complex dimension of described phenomena. We tear down the walls, we extend the horizon and thereby we increase the risk to lose the way. We'll see then if and where we'll need to build another wall.

In our view, if the two main defects of our systemic semiotics are the lack of completeness and an excessive heterodoxy, its best justification, perhaps its only merit, is to try to present an overview of a series of issues that accept (and sometimes require) a semiotic treatment, searching and emphasizing those connections that can give an (even approximate) idea of the integrity of the set. An overview that contains, right from its start, different perspectives, viewpoints and languages. An overview that confronts what is different and tries, with no guarantee of success, to rebuild a plurality.

The human complexity (and human knowledge's complexity) is such that there isn't a prospect of study or theoretical approach that we can consider right or wrong in itself: it's only partial. This is why we can accept the conclusion to which came the Latin orator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus in the year 382 AD in respect of the need to resolve the dispute between the Christianity, already official religion of the Empire, and the classical religious tradition: *uno itineri non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum*<sup>132</sup>. The quotation may well serve as a theoretical (and sentimental) justification for any interdisciplinary research.

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<sup>132</sup> By just one way you can not arrive to a so big secret.

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