

INTERVIEW WITH
PROFESSOR ROGER
PARENT, FROM THE
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA,
CANADA

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professor Parent added some comments
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Professor Parent, you taught a lecture course entitled “Semiotics of Cultural Conflicts” at the University of Tartu. This title consists of two very vague concepts, the definition of which constitutes a metalinguistic problem in the humanities. How do you define the concepts of “culture” and “semiotics” in the context of your approach?

My lecture course provides an introduction to what may be called “applied cultural semiotics”. Interdisciplinary research on intercultural training points to a demonstrated need for a theoretical model for framing both research and approaches to intercultural education. Furthermore, in light of the current challenges of cultural diversity, this need is not only academic but relates to very pressing social issues. However, the applied nature of the course obliges one to make choices in how complex terms such as “culture” and “semiotics” are defined because, eventually, these choices turn into praxis in practical fieldwork.

In this respect, the cultural semiotics developed by the Tartu School provides a very effective theory for working with the complexity of cultural phenomena. My definition of culture is thus based on Tartu semiotics, starting with Lotman’s concept of semiosphere. Simply defined, culture is a system for processing information we receive from both the “outside world” and also the “inside” or personal world. That system leads to the creation of a cultural point of view which in turn defines our value and belief systems. In short, the proposed approach adopts the Tartu School definition of culture as a secondary modeling system.

“Semiotics” is another very complex and much debated concept, with very differing perspectives from linguistics, philosophy, literature and biology. One must add such different perspectives are also quite culturally-based. For example, Dr. Peeter Torop has correctly pointed out that Lotman’s work is not sufficiently known outside the Russian world. The approach developed in the course combines Tartu cultural semiotics with Peircean phenomenological semiotics as the latter provides us with an enlarged model of the sign, so as to move beyond the linguistic sign.

The fusion of these two bodies of semiotic thought seems very natural. Just as Ch. S. Peirce widened the study of signs by concentrating on the action of the sign itself, or semiosis, Tartu cultural semiotics significantly innovated by pointing out the close, and inescapable parallel between biology and culture, between biosphere and semiosphere. A major factor in this shift, I believe, stems from the fact that many of

the Tartu-Moscow scholars were literary scholars and not linguists. This orientation led to a particular focus on the evolution of the literary text and hence, culture. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that in both Peirce's theory of signs and the Tartu School, emphasis is on creativity and the principle of evolution through the creation of new meaning.

How would you define the concept of "conflict"? Its semantic field is also extremely broad. It is increasingly used as an euphemism, in order to avoid using grave words like "war" and "violence". Is there any justification for such verbal rhetoric? Could you also specify the notion of conflict as it relates to the notion of crisis?

The concept of conflict is extremely useful in identifying cultural need. Conflict can of course degenerate into very real and complex confrontations which in turn lead to the specialized interventions of conflict resolution and subsequent post-conflict situations, peace and governance programs, etc. For example, the training developed in applied cultural semiotics has now been requested in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka by professionals and researchers who are very much involved in these highly volatile situations. So in this sense, the methods and principles of cultural semiotics provide practical, effective means for deconstructing opposing world views and bringing players into some kind of effective dialogue ... if they so wish. However, cultural semiotics cannot convince people to stop killing one another ... either physically or in a symbolic sense.

On a more positive note, conflict does not necessarily refer to a negative reality. Conflict is inherent to growth and change. I believe this trait is what Lotman was referring to when he referred to the polyphonic nature of the semiosphere and conflicting forces striving for existence. Conflict is basic to the disequilibrium of the system and hence can lead to systemic evolution. The problem lies in harnessing the energy of a conflictual situation in such a way as to create new and more significant situations and modes of coexistence.

The "term" crisis refers to a more localized expression of underlying need, in terms of space and time. Also, when viewed from a peircean perspective, "crisis" remains an interpretation very much dependant on the perspectives within a particular environment. What is a crisis for one person or group of persons can be viewed as an opportunity for others. Also, a crisis can be imagined or real, manipulated or accidental. Whereas conflict can be long-term, often hidden and repressed, crisis needs to be framed. In other words, a reframing of the same event may result in its no longer being a crisis but as an opportunity. History is rife with examples of artificially produced crises for ideological and political ends.

On the other hand, a crisis might manifest itself as a flashpoint for deeper conflicts and issues, in which case the temporal frame in which to act, or not, is much more restricted. As in all cultural phenomenon, crisis and conflict are to be contextualized in order to be properly understood. The real question is how to undertake this contextualization process? One principle I like to use to this effect is the back-drop of collective memory. In a sense, the past is always prelude to the future.

As a matter of fact, what is semiotics of cultural conflicts? I understand that your goal is to help prevent and resolve conflicts that develop in culturally diverse environments. What role does semiotics play in this?

The semiotics of cultural conflicts represents an emerging field of study brought on perhaps by increasing cultural diversity. For example, the recent White Paper on cultural diversity by the Council of Europe calls for new models to better manage culture-related issues.

Research has also shown that semiotics provides effective tools for decoding culture. Cultural semiotics proves most useful in developing perceptive skills to recognize cultural signs, cognitive skills to understand their signification and meta-cognitive abilities to “learn about learning about culture”. This latter point, meta-cognition is being increasingly emphasized in emerging models to intercultural training.

So in essence, the semiotics of cultural conflicts, as I attempt to implement the approach proposes a phenomenological approach to cultural analysis, intercultural communication and exchange. Phenomenological semiotics proves very useful in working with specific cultural environments. As the Tartu scholars have repeatedly pointed out, the cultural sign is always very contextualized. Semiotics assists in working with context as text. Tartu cultural semiotics is effective in providing a model by which to relate the observed cultural sign to the cultural system and subsequently, in cracking some of its codes. In the end, as Eco has affirmed, cultural meaning implies cultural codes. Yet, as other semioticians have pointed out, like Keir Elam, we still know very little about codes.

Cultural conflicts do have some positive aspects ...

Yes, as already indicated, such conflicts signal “hot spots”, loci where dysfunctional elements in a culture occur and also of what issues they pertain to (norms, values and beliefs). Every cultural situation contains its opposite. So in this sense, conflict can be turned into an opportunity for growth and evolution ... providing the culture is not in a self-destructive mode ... which is often regrettably the case. I do not believe however that the use of confrontation to settle conflicts is productive. War is expensive. For this reason, in my use of applied cultural semiotics, I try to move from conflict to situations of exchange.

There is also the underlying question of ideology, which must be considered. Ideology often fuels conflict and represents, as Eco pointed out, a form of sclerotic thinking. Semiotics and ideology are not good bedfellows. And at this time and age, semiotics is a most valuable discipline for assisting individuals and groups of moving out of fossilized thinking. Semiotics further obliges one to question one’s own ideological stance and assumptions.

Maybe you could formulate one important technique or device that can help one cope as painlessly as possible with inter-cultural communications?

The key issue, the starting point for effective intercultural communication is to de-center, to stop seeing oneself as the center of the universe and to “walk in the other

person's shoes" for a while. There are different words for this: empathy, intercultural sensitivity, confirmation of identity. If one can't trust the messenger, one won't trust the message. So the starting point is to build trust and respect with individuals in the target culture. In communication theory, this decentering process can be accomplished by confirming the cultural identity of the speaker addressed. However, although this is the sine qua non starting point, it must be remembered that "good intentions" last only so long. When push comes to shove, so to speak, other principles and techniques must come into play. Here is where semiotics is so important because this discipline can assist individuals in getting inside the cultural codes of the target environment. This step, I believe, is the second step in intercultural communication and often takes the form of a "cognitive map" by which the observer can represent cultural space in the form of a diagram. Together, the capacity for empathy and for building a cognitive map creates what research on "cultural intelligence" calls "mindfulness". This term is a Buddhist concept and, because of its multi-leveled references to both cognitive and affective cultural learning, adequately represents that all-important initial technique to working with people from other cultures.

The works of the Tartu school of cultural semiotics, especially those of Juri Lotman, play a great role in your approach, as you said. How did you discover Tartu and Lotman?

I discovered the Tartu School of cultural semiotics and the writings of Lotman and his colleagues at the beginning of my PhD studies at Laval University in Quebec City. This discovery was largely due to the seminal role played by my thesis director, Dr. Louis Francoeur, in disseminating Tartu Cultural Semiotics in Canada. The discovery of this body of work had a major impact on my life, both personally and professionally. As many Canadians, I was struggling with the issue of my own cultural identity.

The famous Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures revealed to me the idea that culture could be an object of study and that there were tools for studying cultures. I then had the opportunity to do a series of documentaries on cultural conflict and the Tartu scholars were most generous, and patient, in assisting me in gaining greater knowledge as to this extremely rich scholarly tradition and heritage.

How well-known is Tartu semiotics abroad?

This is a difficult question. For specialists in semiotics, the Tartu school is well-known internationally. However, is this school well understood? I believe that to be an entirely different matter. Tartu cultural semiotics has emerged out of the context of Slavic tradition which in itself, represents an enormous body of academic, scientific and artistic work. In this sense, Tartu semiotics becomes an initiation into an entirely new worldview and this view, because of its uniqueness, has much to offer this postmodern and postcolonial world we live in.

The Tartu School covers a very wide range of enquiry, from art to biology. In terms of culture, this combination of biosphere and semiosphere allows Tartu semiotics to look at signs in both verbal and non-verbal communication. In fieldwork,

non-verbal communication plays a key role in cracking cultural codes. I believe it is this nature/culture perspective that is the least understood abroad.

You have adopted a critical approach to the concepts of cultural semiotics and have tried to develop and adapt them. In what direction?

I am attempting to further develop and adapt cultural semiotics for applied research in culture-specific situations. I have tested the practical nature of Tartu cultural semiotics in many different disciplines such as economics, education, health sciences, and native studies. These applications have been conducted in very demanding situations, such as suicide prevention programs in Aboriginal villages in Australia or delivering culturally appropriate service to individuals with intellectual disabilities in Montreal, Canada. In all these instances, I see institutions and dedicated professionals attempting to meet the complex challenges of cultural diversity and the results obtained to date confirm the value of the Tartu school in providing effective tools for “working with culture” and for innovating in intercultural situations. However, semiotics remains abstract. It is not always easy for professionals in the field to grasp the relationship between function and system. So in my work I am now trying to design simpler training kits that can make semiotic concepts more accessible... without being simplistic and to thereby facilitate more applied research on cultural issues.

In your practical work, you try to integrate cultural semiotics with anthropology, socio-psychology and other cultural sciences. What are the advantages of cultural semiotics compared to other disciplines that examine culture? What are its shortcomings?

Firstly, semiotics has an interdisciplinary advantage because this field acts as a bridge between the social sciences and the humanities. In this sense, semiotics provides a framework by which to transcode findings from different disciplines.

Secondly, as I mentioned earlier, cultural semiotics offers three major advantages for working with culture.

1. Cultural semiotics provides training in perceptive skills so that one can begin to recognize cultural signs.
2. Cultural semiotics then provides training in cognitive skills for decoding and understanding those signs in relation to the cultural system.
3. Cultural semiotics deals with semiosis and thus provides training in meta-cognition, that is, in “learning to learn” about culture. And it is meta-cognition that the emerging models of intercultural training are presently emphasizing, in all fields, including business. In this regard, cultural semiotics is unbeatable.

This discipline has been around since the dawn of time. Some of my colleagues jokingly refer to it as “the oldest profession”. Even in Ancient times, philosophers were arguing as to who had “the right” to work with signs. Some claim that only very educated people could interpret signs. Others rightfully pointed out that people with little education could interpret signs very well, such as the farmer or the hunter.

Semiotics is both very concrete and very abstract. Its shortcomings lie, I believe, in the way it is taught. In this respect, Juri Lotman provides an excellent example of how the discipline can be communicated through concrete examples from

Russian literature and then applied to other domains. I also believe that Lotman and his colleagues provided an inspiring example of scholars that are deeply engaged in the issues and the problems of their time, especially with respect to cultural resilience.

You use semiotics for bridging the gap between the humanities and social sciences. What is it that makes semiotics into an umbrella science, the lingua franca of the scientific world?

Whether in science or the humanities, one works with creative and communicative processes. In all disciplines and fields of endeavor, one proceeds from intuition and hypotheses to experimentation and subsequent confirmation (or not) of the resulting message by community representatives. And in all these instances, one is constantly interpreting perceived reality through signs. Semiotics is very effective in stripping us of our personal and ethno-centric illusions and in allowing us to see the interplay between subjective and so-called objective meanings.

A striking example of this situation can be found in professionals using their scientific discipline to make interpretations of reality that they believe to be objective when in reality they are being extremely ethno-centric. I have seen psychologists from dominant cultures make grossly erroneous statements with respect to research in dominated or minority cultures, convinced that their scientific analysis provided them with sufficient justification for what amounted to cultural stereotyping. Such “cultural blind spots” can lead to very explosive situations.

One of the problems of semiotics has been the use of hermetic language. Semiotics is also reproached for being excessively vague and having a tendency for abstract speculation, as you mentioned earlier. This has all promoted a skeptical attitude toward semiotics on behalf of the general public. Your great service is that you give semiotics an applied output, bring it out of the purely academic sphere, closer to the general public. In commercial communications, i.e. advertising and marketing, the semiotic approach has been used for some time.

One must remember that many semioticians developed this discipline at great personal risk to themselves and their families ... under the nose of the KGB, so to speak. Abstraction was a way of outsmarting the censorship in Moscow.

For other semioticians, such as Greimas, a high level of abstraction was necessary so as to assure a wide range of practical application. So in a way, my work owes a great debt to the courageous thinkers and pioneers in semiotics who developed the concepts and principles as fundamental research. Practical application can only be valid if it relies on solid theoretical and methodological foundations. We see the proof of that work today in the many fields of applied semiotics.

Because cultural diversity represents such a dominant concern in today's world, it would seem that the application of cultural semiotics to “Peace and Governance Studies” or “Conflict Resolution” constitutes a new and important field of study.

What are the future prospects for applied semiotics? Where could it expand?

Increasing attention is being paid to the creative potential of semiotics. In marketing, for example, experts define “value” in much the same way as Saussure did. In other words, the value of a car can be determined with respect to its relation to other makers of cars, etc. The same principle applies to all commodities.

So it is in the capacity for semiotics to assist in the creation of new and meaningful solutions to specific problems that I believe the discipline can further expand. As Frankl pointed out, what we search for, basically, is for a meaningful existence, both individually and culturally. Semiotics provides us with insight into the principles involving the creation of new, collective meaning ... what Tartu cultural semiotics refers to as “text”. Semiotics is not an analytical tool only ... but a creative tool. Tartu semiotics gives us understanding into “cultural creativity”. And in this sense, I believe this school provides real hope and effective methods for developing cultural specificity and cultural resilience, be it at an organizational level or a larger, regional, national scale.

Where have you taught semiotics of cultural conflicts recently? What was the attitude of those being taught?

I have taught the semiotics of cultural conflict recently in France, Australia and Canada. I also had the pleasure of delivering the approach twice in Estonia and am now teaching it at the University of Bologna. Although the course was delivered in a wide array of disciplines, the underlying shared reaction was the capacity of semiotics to act as a coherent theoretical frame for learning that could be simultaneously cognitive, affective and behavioral. This observation ties in with Morris’ initial hypothesis as to the role of semiotics in “unifying” scientific knowledge. Semiotics has also proven it can facilitate both culture-general and culture-specific approaches to intercultural training. In the end, the signification of the cultural sign is always contextualized and semiotics assists in decoding and understanding this specificity.

What is your most extreme cultural experience in a conflict area?

The most extreme cultural experience was in Paris. My cameraman blundered and filmed some individuals of Arab origin without their permission in one of the city’s “hot spots”. I found myself in the middle of a physical confrontation that could have degenerated very rapidly into an extremely violent and life-threatening situation. Somehow, I managed to defuse the situation by refusing to fight and by engaging dialogue. I learned an important lesson. Every cultural situation contains its opposite, hence the implicit potential for intercultural exchange as opposed to confrontation.

Where will you be going next to teach semiotics of cultural conflicts?

This year (2010), I will be teaching the semiotics of cultural conflicts in Italy, France and Canada. In collaboration with the Tartu Semiotics Department, I am also building an inter-university distance-learning version of the course. So hopefully, new learning

and communicative technologies can assist in making semiotic training more accessible.

Interviewd by Priit Põhjala