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THOMAS A. SEBEOK, HYBRID JOKE-TELLER

We all know that Thomas A. Sebeok liked to tell jokes besides anecdotes, especially hybrid jokes. This was connected with his ‘professional activity’. In fact jokes, as a rule, are considered as “one form of narration”, hence a type of verbal art, even though they are normally accompanied by various gestural elements as accessories (manual and facial expressions, postures, and the like) which reinforce the facetiousness conveyed by the verbal expressions. But hybrid jokes are narrated, but only up to a point: the climax, and also sometimes several internal punch lines, can be delivered only by means of gestures.

Why did Sebeok take a ‘professional’ interest in this subgenre of jokes? Because it confirms his critique of phonocentrism, a critique that is topical in his conception of semiotics, or doctrine of signs, as he says. All jokes are intrinsically pansemiotic configurations, in which the verbal twist is typically primary. Consequently jokes cannot be conveyed solely by nonverbal means. Instead hybrid jokes, if delivered face-to-face, must be accompanied by appropriate gesticulation. Their humor cannot be satisfying imparted in the dark or over the phone. If communicated in script, they must be illustrated by pictorial displays of various sorts. The funniness of the verbal portion of a hybrid joke falls off in proportion to – gestural or pictorial – visual elaboration.

Sebeok dedicated an essay to hybrid jokes originally published in *Athanos*, X, 2, 1999/2000, *La traduzione*, edited by di S. Petrilli, and now in *Global Semiotics* (Sebeok 2001a).

Sebeok extends the boundaries of traditional semiotics, which is vitiated by the fundamental error of mistaking a part (that is, human signs and in particular verbal signs) for the whole (that is, all possible signs, human and nonhuman). On the contrary, Sebeok’s ‘global semiotics’, as described above, is the place where the ‘life sciences’ and the ‘sign sciences’ converge, therefore the place of consciousness of the fact that the human being is a sign in a universe of signs. Such an approach presupposes a critique of anthropocentrism and of glottocentrism with its indubitable positive effects when a question of developing educational aims and methods.

Stressing the species-specific character of human language, Sebeok, with Jean Umiker-Sebeok, intervened polemically and ironically with regard to the enthusiasm (which he attempted to cool down) displayed for theories and practices developed for training animals, based on the assumption that animals can talk (cf. Sebeok 1986, Chp. 2) Furthermore, the distinction between *language* and *speech* and the thesis that language appeared much earlier than speech in the evolution of the human species add a further element to the critique of phonocentrism.

Human nonverbal signs include signs that depend on natural languages and signs that, on the contrary, do not depend on natural language and therefore transcend the categories of linguistics. These include the signs of ‘parasitic’ languages, such as artificial languages, the signs of ‘gestural languages’, such as the sign languages of Amerindian (see Sebeok 1979) and Australian aborigines, monastic signs (see Sebeok and Umiker Sebeok 1987) and the language of deaf-mutes; the signs of infants, and the signs of the human body, both in its more culturally dependent manifestations as well as its natural-biological manifestations. The language of deaf-mutes is further proof of the fact that man as a semiotic animal is not the speaking animal but the animal that is endowed with language, the primary modelling device. It is not true that dogs only lack speech. Dogs and other non-human animals lack language. Instead, the deaf-mute only lacks speech, as a pathology. This means that other non-verbal systems, such as the gestural, can be grafted onto the human primary modelling device. And thanks to these sign systems the deaf-mute is able to accomplish the same inventive and creative mental functions as any other human animal.

The study of modeling behavior in and across all life forms requires a methodological framework that has been developed in the field of biosemiotics. This methodological framework is *modeling systems theory* as proposed by Sebeok in his research on the interface between semiotics and biology. Modeling systems theory analyzes semiotic phenomena in terms of modeling processes (cf. Sebeok and Danesi 2000: 1-43).

In the light of semiotics viewed as a modeling systems theory, semiosis – a capacity pertaining to all life forms – may be defined as ‘the capacity of a species to produce and comprehend the specific types of models it requires for processing and codifying perceptual input in its own way’ (*Ibidem*: 5).

The applied study of modeling systems theory is called *systems analysis*, which distinguishes between primary, secondary and tertiary modeling systems.

The primary modeling system is the innate capacity for *simulative* modeling – in other words, it is a system that allows organisms to simulate something in species-specific ways (cf.

*Ibidem*: 44-45). Sebeok calls ‘language’ the species-specific primary modeling system of the species called *Homo*.

The secondary modeling system subtends both ‘indicational’ and ‘extensional’ modeling processes. The nonverbal form of indicational modeling has been documented in various species. Extensional modeling, on the other hand, is a uniquely human capacity because it presupposes *language* (primary modeling system), which Sebeok distinguishes from *speech* (human secondary modeling system; cf. *Ibidem* 82-95).

The tertiary modeling system subtends highly abstract, symbol-based modeling processes. Tertiary modeling systems are the human cultural systems which the Moscow-Tartu school had mistakenly dubbed ‘secondary’ as a result of conflating ‘speech’ and ‘language’ (cf. *Ibidem*: 120-129).

On the nonverbal component of semiosis is founded the anthroposemiotic component, which necessarily and additionally implies the species-specific modeling device called by Sebeok ‘language’. On language is founded speech of the various verbal languages and are founded the various human nonverbal languages. But the common foundation in language does not mean that nonverbal language are similar to verbal language and that in study of it we may use the same categories used in linguistics.

Consequently, Sebeok’s doctrine of signs insists particularly on the autonomy of nonverbal sign systems from the verbal. Such autonomy is demonstrated through his study of human sign systems which depend on the verbal only in part, in spite of the predominance of verbal language in the sphere of anthroposemiosis.

The historical origin of human verbal and nonverbal signs is in the human species-specific primary modeling device, i.e., in Sebeok’s terminology, language, which was a primary evolutionary adaptation of hominids. Speech developed out of language, and like language made its appearance as an adaptation, but for the sake of communication and much later than language, precisely with *Homo sapiens*, not more than about 300,000 years ago. Only after evolution of the physical and neurological capacity for speech in *Homo sapiens* was speech possible, i.e., use of language for vocal communication. Successively speech developed as a double derivative *exaptation*. Speech came to be *exapted* for modeling and to function, therefore, as a secondary modeling system. Beyond increasing the capacity for communication, speech also increases the capacity for innovation and for the ‘play of musement’. Exapted for communication, first in the form of speech and later of script (cf. *S/S*, 1: 443), language enabled human beings to enhance the nonverbal capacity with which they were already endowed.

Concerning the relation between language and speech, Sebeok remarks that it has required a plausible mutual adjustment of the encoding with the decoding capacity. On the one hand, language was 'exapted' for communication (first in the form of speech, i. e., for 'ear and mouth work' and later of script, and so forth), and, on the other, speech was exapted for (secondary) modeling, i.e., for 'mind work'. 'But', adds Sebeok, 'since absolute mutual comprehension remains a distant goal, the system continues to be fine-tuned and tinkered with still' (Sebeok 1991: 56).

The process of exaptation took several million years to accomplish, the answer seems to be that the adjustment of a species-specific mechanism for encoding language into speech, that is, producing signs vocally, with a matching mechanism for decoding it, that is, receiving and interpreting a stream of incoming verbal/ vocal signs (sentences), must have taken that long to fine-tune a process which is far from complete (since humans have great difficulties in understanding each other's spoken messages).

The exaptation of speech to modelling implies that speech is forever involved in the mind work, in the thought. Instead its presence in human communication is not frequent. We may communicate without speech; but it is not possible for our thinking, that is interpreting without speech.

Body languages belongs to the sphere of *anthroposemiosis*, the object of anthroposemiotics. Following Charles Morris's and Thomas Sebeok's terminological specifications, semiotics describes sign behaviour with general reference to the organism, i.e., it identifies semiosis and life, and distinguishes between 'signs in human animals' and 'signs in non-human animals,' reserving the term 'language' as a special term for the former. In others words, *language is specific to man as a semiotic animal*, that is, as a living being not only able to use signs – i.e. capable to *semiosis* –, but also able to reflect on signs through signs – i.e. capable of *semiotics*. In this acceptation, language is not verbal language alone: 'language' *refers both to verbal and non-verbal human signs*. In this view, that is, from a semiotic and not a linguistic perspective (i.e. pertaining to linguistics), *language is not reduced to speech* but speech is a specification of language. Language is acoustic language as much as the gestural or the tactile, etc. depending on the kind of sign vehicle that intervenes, which is not necessary limited to the verbal in a strict sense.

On this subject the following statement made by Morris seems important:

For though animal signs may be interconnected, and interconnected in such a way that animals may be said to infer, there is no evidence that these signs are combined by

animals which produce them according to limitations of combinations necessary for the signs to form a language system. Such considerations strongly favor the hypothesis that language — as here defined — is unique to man. (1971 [1946]: 130)

This means that by comparison with animal signs human language is characterized by the fact that its signs can be combined to form compound signs. It would seem, therefore, that, in the last analysis, this 'capacity for combination' is the most distinctive element. This conception is very close to Sebeok's when he states that language (he too distinguishing it from the communicative function) is characterized by *syntax*, that is, the possibility of using a finite number of signs to produce an infinite number of combinations through recourse to given rules.

As we said, body languages includes different sign systems. What is common to these sign system is their common foundation in *language* intended as a *specific human modelling device* (see Sebeok 1991 and 2001c). The connection between verbal language and body languages largely depends on their common participation in language understood as primary human modelling.

On the original link between gestual language and verbal language the relation between gesture and verbal intonation is interesting, and specifically the important phenomenon of language creativity called 'intonational metaphor'. Bakhtin (1926) observes that an intimate kinship binds the intonational metaphor in real-life speech with the 'metaphor of gesticulation.' In fact, the word itself was originally a 'linguistic gesture', a 'component of a complex body gesture', understanding gesture broadly to include facial expression, gesticulation of the face. Intonation and gesture belong to body language; and they express a living, dynamic relationship with the outside world and social environment.

Thanks to Sebeok the science that studies the *semiotic animal*, i.e. man – the only animal not only capable of using signs (i.e. of semiosis), but also of reflecting on signs through signs, anthroposemiotics, has today freed itself from *two traditional limitations: anthropocentrism and glottocentrism*.

With regard to the first, anthroposemiotics does not coincide with general semiotics but is a part of it. Semiotics is far broader than a science that studies signs solely in the sphere of socio-cultural life. Semiotics also studies the signs of unintentional communication (semiology of signification); before this it was limited by exclusive preference for the signs of intentional communication, Saussure's *sémiologie* (semiology of communication). By contrast, semiotics following Thomas A. Sebeok and his "global semiotics" studies communication not only in culture, but also in the universe of life generally. With regard to

the second aspect, getting free from glottocentrism, critique of glottocentrism in anthroposemiotics must be extended to all those trends in semiotics which refer to linguistics for their sign model. Anthroposemiotics insists on the autonomy of non-verbal sign systems from the verbal and also studies human sign systems that depend on the verbal only in part, despite the prejudicial claim that verbal language predominates in the sphere of anthroposemiosis.

To get free from the anthropocentric and glottocentric perspective as it has characterized semiotics generally, implies to take other sign systems into account beyond those specific to mankind.

Says Sebeok on hybrid jokes.

The interlaced semiotic transmutations of jokes belonging to his genre depend for their graspable performance on the principle of successivity (or indexicality) superimposed over that of simultaneity (or iconicity). They are therefore a semiotically more complex formation than the run-of-the-mill, orthodox witticisms that brighten our daily lives. §

Indexicality, iconicity, and symbolicity are three complementary rather than antagonistic categories. Peirce returned repeatedly to his sign typology. By 1906 he had classified sixty-six different types of signs. However, the most important in all his reflections on signs was a trichotomy formulated in relation to his original typology and presented in an article of 1867, “On A New List of Categories” (CP 1.545-559). With this trichotomy Peirce identified three types of signs: *icons*, *indexes* and *symbols*. Sebeok evidenced that all three are present in non-human semiosis as well (for a synthesis of the comparison between the human world and the world of other animals relatively to this typology, see Sebeok 2001a). From the perspective of sign types there is no difference between human and non-human semiosis. In the light of Sebeok’s research it is now clear that icons, indices and symbols are present both in languages (which are human) and in non languages.

As observes Sebeok elaborating on Peirce’s typology, not signs but sign aspects are the object of classification. The hybrid character of the sign should now be obvious with respect to its distinction into “symbol”, “index”, and “icon”. The Peircean conception of the relation between symbol, icon, and index has very often been misunderstood. In fact, these terms were thought to denote three clearly distinguished and different types of sign, each with characteristics so specific as to exclude the other two. Now we know that signs which are exclusively symbols, icons or indices do not exist in the real world. Furthermore (and what

most interests us here), in Peirce's theory the symbol is a mere abstraction. It is never conceived as existing as a pure symbol but is always more or less mixed with iconicity and indexicality, or to say it with Peirce, it is always more or less *degenerate*.

This implies that more than being signs in their own right, the icon and index represent different levels in *degeneracy of the symbol*. The symbol is not purely a symbol but almost always takes the characteristics of either the icon or index. The symbol may be represented iconically as a body in a state of unstable equilibrium in which the stabilizing symbolic force is counteracted by iconic and indexical forces. But this image establishes a relation of contrast between symbol, index and icon when in fact they are not separate or distinct, nor are they in a relation of opposition.

Otherwise with respect to the symbol we would have signs that are purely icons or purely indices and not simultaneously symbols; or symbols with no traces of iconicity or indexicality. Perhaps the image that best accounts for the relation of the symbol to the index and icon is that of a filigreed transparency with uneven traces of iconicity and indexicality as opposed to pure transparency.

Indexicality is at the core of the symbol given that the symbol depends on the interpretant as a result of its relation to the object. This is what makes a sign a symbol. This means that Transuasion, which characterizes the symbol as a transuasiational sign, is considered in its obsistent aspect (see *CP* 2.92), and that the index is an obsistent sign. On the other hand, insofar as it is determined by the instances of what it denotes and being a general type of law, the symbol entails indexicality. In the sign considered as a symbol, identity hinges upon the alterity of the sign which is determined by mediation of the interpretant, so that insofar as it is a symbol, "a sign is something by knowing which we know something more" (*CP* 8.332). However, this is so because the sign is not only a symbol, or better, the very fact of being a symbol involves iconicity and indexicality given that thirdness, the mode of existence of the symbol, presupposes firstness and secondness or originality and obsistence, which correspond respectively to the icon and index.

Indexicality is discussed by Peirce to solve the problem of the connection between verbal language and referents in real world. Verbal language is characterized by conventionality and "diagrammatisation". Diagrammatisation makes verbal language a "sort of algebra"; consequently it seems to be a sphere apart, separate from its objects. But thanks to indexicality, that is, to an association of contiguity, verbal language is not reducible to an algebraic system. Indexicality enables language to pass from the level of diagrammatisation to the level of application of its diagrams.

Peirce considers the problem of indexicality as part of his quest to solve the problem of how verbal language, characterized by diagrammatisation, which makes it a “sort of algebra,” is able to connect up with its referents. This is only possible, says Peirce, thanks to indexicality, that is to say, association of contiguity:

It is not the language alone, with its mere associations of similarity, but the language taken in connection with the auditor’s own experiential associations of contiguity which determines for him what house is meant. It is requisite then, in order to show what we are talking or writing about, to put the hearer’s or reader’s mind into real, active connection with the concatenation of experience or of fiction with which we are dealing, and, further to draw his attention to, and identify, a certain number of particular points in such concatenation. (*CP* 3.419)

The function of indexicality is to make language pass from the level of diagrammatisation to the level of application of its diagrams. The recurrent distinction between subjects and predicates of propositions implies the distinction, says Peirce, between the indicative part of discourse and what it affirms, questions, or commands about it.

This excursus on semiotics is sufficient to explain Sebeok’s interest in hybrid jokes.

In his article mentioned at the beginning of this paper, which was originally published in Italian, Sebeok’s examples of hybrid jokes are all translated into drawings by Luciano Ponzio, and are accompanied by the following captions: ‘The Danish Photographer’, ‘Les Baguettes’, ‘Jesus Christ on the Cross’, ‘The Dead Cat’, ‘Short Necks’. These drawings were produced on the basis of a set of fun photographs sent to Luciano Ponzio by Sebeok, picturing Jean Umiker-Sebeok, Erica L. Sebeok, and himself as they modelled the gestures.

*Translation from Italian by Susan Petrilli*

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