Semiotics of Nonsense and Non-sense: A Lotmanian Perspective /
Semiótica do absurdo e do sem-sentido: uma perspectiva lotmaninana

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ABSTRACT

Absurdity and nonsense are usually studied as philosophical and/or logical categories. This paper examines nonsense as a semiotic phenomenon and as part of the mechanisms of meaning generation, and argues that the problem of nonsense and meaning as a whole is foremost a *textual* problem. This approach is based on the legacy of the semiotician and literary scholar Iurii Lotman, and especially his concepts of explosion and the notions of "non-text" and "minus-device." The concept of nonsense thus highlights the inherent informational paradox of human culture and human communication systems, in which noise, errors and mishaps do not impede communication but on the contrary, stimulate it. On a larger scale the example of how human cultures deal with 'non-sense' in communication has implications for the study of the evolution of human culture and language and also draws additional light to the methodological problem of the text/sign relation.

KEYWORDS: Nonsense; Meaning; Lotman; Minus-device; Non-sign

RESUMO

Absurdo e falta de sentido são geralmente estudados como categorias filosóficas e/ou lógicas. Este artigo examina o absurdo como um fenômeno semiótico e como parte dos mecanismos de geração de significado. Argumenta que o problema do absurdo e do significado como um todo é, acima de tudo, um problema textual. *Esta abordagem se fundamenta no legado do semioticista e estudioso da literatura Iúri Lótman, especialmente em seus conceitos de explosão e nas noções de "não-texto" e "menos-dispositivo". O conceito de absurdo destaca o inerente paradoxo informacional da cultura humana e de seus sistemas de comunicação, nos quais ruído, erros e contratempos não impedem a comunicação, pelo contrário, estimulam-na. Em uma escala maior, o exemplo de como as culturas humanas lidam com o "não-sentido" na comunicação tem implicações para o estudo da evolução da cultura e da linguagem humanas e também traz luz adicional ao problema metodológico da relação texto/signo.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Absurdo; Significado; Lotman; Menos-dispositivo; Não-signo

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1 Nonsense, Non-Sense, and Language

'It's utter nonsense!'—'It doesn't make any sense!'—'This is just meaningless!' Regrettably or not, nonsense is everywhere. It is an integral part of our life, which is impossible without the constant, both conscious and subconscious, process of ascribing meaning to different phenomena and separating what is meaningful and what is not in our daily routines. Moreover, many living organisms—some would argue all—too are engaged in the process of 'making sense' of their environment. There are different approaches to the problem of nonsense/non-sense, which I briefly overview before assessing the problem in the context of Iurii Lotman's semiotic theory.

Let us begin with nonsense as a literary category. Absurdist fiction and poetry has long ago become separate literary genres, dealing predominantly with parody, irony and satire. In the Anglophone world, literary nonsense is often studied on the material of the Victorian era, with Edward Lear and Lewis Carrol as the most often used authors, although nonsensical literary texts can be found in any period, including the Middle ages (BEGG, 2013). Furthermore, in certain periods, absurd comes from the margins to the core of the system and becomes dominant in different artistic movements. Apart from the well-known names of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett, one can name the *Oberiuty* group during the 1920s in Russia,[1] the Theater of Absurd in Europe in the 1950s, or the New Absurdist Movement of the recent period.[2]

These movements tend to shutter the conventional boundaries of art, provoke and question the norm, usually through farce, buffoonery, and various forms of subversion, sometimes even through theatricalization of their lifestyle and behavior. Absurdist fiction occupies an established niche of the literary system and in fact produces perfectly sensible texts that challenge the normative core of the system, its canon and mainstream. Literary nonsense is thus not a *proper nonsense* because it is a product of a well-developed system, in which a metalevel of self-reflection appears. The next question we have to ask now is how to define nonsense on the level of language.

Natural language, as probably the most powerful sign system at disposal of modern man, is the semiotic sphere where the study of nonsense has been most

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[1] See, e.g., Cornwell (1991).
[2] The Writers Magazine of The New Absurdist Movement was active between 2006 and 2009 and can be found on the website http://amr.obook.org.

extensive. Wittgenstein, for example, argues in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) — where he sets out to define the boundaries of thought, language and the world — that nonsensical propositions lie outside of the limits of language (WITTGENSTEIN 2001).

In the ideal world, it should be very true: every language has a set of words and grammatical rules, and everything that contradicts them should be perceived as errors, mistakes and, in general, nonsense. More than 100 years ago, Saussure (1966, p.13) argued that communication was made possible because we used "not exactly of course, but approximately—the same signs united with the same concepts." Thus, if the connection between the signifier and the signified is broken, communication should fail. However, it appears that language and especially its users are highly resilient to errors and refuse to give up even when presented with pure gibberish.

In the Anglophone culture, probably the most famous example of that is the poem *Jabberwocky* from Lewis Carrol's *Alice in the Wonderland* which begins as follows:

> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
> All mimsy were the borogoves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle (1994, pp.21–22) rightly points out that the poem makes sense on phonetic, morphological, syntactic and even semantic levels. It also makes sense as a poem because it is structured as a verse and builds upon a certain tradition. In the book, Alice's reaction is also quite typical: "It seems very pretty […] but it's *rather* hard to understand! […] However, *somebody* killed *something;* that's clear, at any rate—" (CARROLL, 2010, p.12).

One could argue that even if Alice could grasp the general picture of the narrative, she could not define the meaning of the word *slithy*, for example. But does this really make the words of the poem nonsensical? After all, they are just neologisms; Humpty-Dumpty explains some of them to Alice. In that respect they are not different from other unfamiliar, foreign, or coined words, like *droog* from Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* or *jedi* from the *Star Wars* saga.

Obviously, syntax and grammar helped Alice a great deal to understand the meaning of the poem and deduce the meaning of unknown words. This brings up another important question: *does the structure of a sign system make its signs meaningful?* The prominent Russian linguist Lev Shcherba coined a much-used phrase *Glokaia kuzdra shteko budlanula bokra i kudriachit bokrenka* – to demonstrate how grammar helps us understand the meaning of the words. A Russian native speaker easily deduces that *kuzdra* in this phrase is a substantive of feminine gender and *glokaia* is an adjective of feminine gender which characterizes *kuzdra*, It is also obvious that *shteko* is an adverb and describes *how* this *kuzdra* did it to *bokr,* and that *bokr* is a living creature, and *bokrenok* is an offspring of a *bokr*. In this manner, we may even translate this phrase into English as *The glocky couzdra shtekly budled the bokr and is kudraching the bokrling/little bokr*. We are able to reconstruct the relationships between the parts of the sentence and can even define them in a circular manner. In English, similar phrases can be easily constructed, as for example, one coined by Andrew Ingraham, *The gostak distims the goshes*.

An infinite number of such phrases or even texts can be created, demonstrating the power of grammatical structures.[3] However, there could be perfectly grammatical phrases that lack meaning. To demonstrate the discrepancy between semantics and grammar, Noam Chomsky coined the phrase "colorless green ideas sleep furiously." To support Chomsky's argument, the real-life example is schizophasia: patients who suffer from it produce essentially absolutely meaningless phrases that are lexically and grammatically correct.

To complicate the picture even more, there are a few examples of how syntax is not needed in order to construct meaningful texts in a language. Lecercle (1990, p.52) reminds us of Heidegger's notion of paratax, or the syntax of "children and primitive people," "the language of thought," as he used to call it. To continue this thought, let us look at one of the most representative examples, E. E. Cummings's (1962, I) poem "O the sun comes up-up-up in the opening…":

> […]
> the grintgrunt wugglewiggle

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[3] For example, in Russian, there are Liudmila Petrushevskaia's "linguistic tales" entitled *Pus'ki biatye,* the texts that are grammatically correct but consist of only nonsensical words.

champychumpchomps yes
the speckled strut begins to scretch and
scratch-scrutch
[…]

Although not totally devoid of traditional grammatical structures, the poem is built on onomatopoeia and is full of an indexical sign of different animals, without naming them (a pig, a rooster). It also may be interpreted as an imitation of the thought process of a (waking) mind that defies the linear syntactical structure but attempts to present thoughts in a sort of a 3D projection.

The most serious argument against grammar as the fundamental meaning-generating device is sign languages which are defined as a multichannel, not solely phonological, concept (ARMSTRONG 1999, Ch. 1). They defy the dichotomy of deep vs. surface structure and demonstrate that languages formally based solely on lexicon are as functional as spoken languages. William C. Stokoe, the founder of sign language linguistics, has proved that American Sign Language by its complexity is no different from natural languages and proposed the term "semantic phonology," in which the sign is presented as "a marriage of a noun and a verb." In opposition to a modular and hierarchical view of language, semantics and phonology appear, as it were, on the same Mobius strip; there are no "deep" and only "surface" structures (ARMSTRONG 1999, pp.91-92). These studies also provide a serious counterargument against the existence of the hypothesized innate hierarchical structure of language.

We seem to have come to an impasse: on the level of language, the grammar does not guarantee the meaningfulness of a message, nor is syntax required to produce meaning as such. All the above mentioned examples in fact demonstrate that a sign or a semiotic structure in its isolation is meaningless. It is the ability of human collectives to be able to make sense of practically anything *when there is a presupposition of a dialogue*, that is, when something is perceived as a message, and not noise.

2 Dialogue and Minus-Device

The idea of the primacy of a dialogue before language is probably the most consistent one in Lotman's works (see Semenenko, 2012, pp.39-51). In this respect, Lotman is very close to Bakhtin, whom he several times mentions in his writings as a

congenial thinker (see, for example, Lotman, 1979).[4] The main difference between their views in that respect can be summarized as follows: where Bakhtin described a polyphonic, multivocal reality of one language, Lotman saw the polyglot reality of nonequivalent overlapping languages. In *Universe of the Mind*, Lotman clearly formulates this principle: "the need for dialogue, *the dialogic situation,* precedes both real dialogue and even the existence of a language in which to conduct it: the semiotic situation precedes the instruments of semiosis" (LOTMAN, 1990, pp.143-144, original emphasis). Furthermore, any text, asserts Lotman, becomes "a complexly organized meaning" (LOTMAN 1977, p.12), a polyglot entity, belonging to at least two languages (semiotic systems) simultaneously (e.g., Lotman, 1977, p.298). It is this need for dialogue that makes a text connected to a variety of extratextual contexts, its semiosphere, and it is this polyglot essence of human communication that brings into existence a seemingly impossible types of signs.

We have so far talked about different types of non-signs that may acquire meaning depending on their context. However, there is a more paradoxical type of signs, namely the signs that do not exist. Logically, it should not be possible because if there is nothing there, it cannot have meaning, can it? And yet they are not so rare: the simplest example of this phenomenon is the omission of words in a text, often because these words are censored. Let's take, for rarity's sake, the bawdy poems by Antoine de la Place (1783, p.119):

> Au tems de nos ancêtres,
> Amoureux & dévots,
> Deux beaux yeux étaient maîtres
> De créer des héros;
> L'amour n'allait guère outre
> Les bernes du désir:
> Où jouissait sans ....;
> Nous ...... sans jouir.

A series of dots in printed texts conventionally signify an omission of a word. In this particular poem, "...." and "……" are indexical signs that refer to the omitted words. Formally, they are not there, but the structure of the poem allows the reader to easily reconstruct the whole text. The rhyme especially facilitates guessing the right

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[4] See studies that compare Lotman's understanding of dialogue with Bakhtin's (see Ivanov, 1973; Grzybek, 1995; Reid, 1990).

words, and the extratextual context—the genre of the book and the censorial regulations of printed word in 18th-century Europe—provides the necessary context for the interpretation of the text. The sign "...." becomes contextual: in this poem, it refers to the tabooed word "foutre," but in other texts it can refer to whatever word. The main point is that these signs certainly aren't meaningless or nonsensical but the question is whether they are within or outside the text.

As early as in 1962 in the article The Problem of Similarity of Art and Life from the Structuralist Point of View, Lotman asserts that the artistic text is perceived in its relation both to what is being re-created and to what is *not* being re-created (LOTMAN 2000, p.383):

> Art is always functional; it is always a relation to something. What is re-created (the representation) is perceived in relation to what is being re-created (the represented), to what is not being re-created and in the multiplicity of other relations. The choice to not re-create some aspects of an object is no less important than the recreation of other aspects.

The text thus paradoxically contains both the elements that are present in the text but also those that are external to it. This idea—that the recipient always perceives the text in a dual way—is one of the most frequent in Lotman's works. Lotman (1977, p.103) refers to molecular physics and the concept of a hole, which means not just the absence of matter but its absence in a structural position, so the hole can be measured in negative terms (there are "light" and "heavy" holes). In the literary text, there are "light" and "heavy" holes as well; Lotman introduces the term "minus-device" (but also uses "minus-trope," "minus-context," etc.), the meaningful absence of elements of the text.

Let us look at a more extreme example, Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin.* This novel in verse consists of eight chapters with up to 60 stanzas in each chapter, but some stanzas are omitted, marked by lines of dots, for example, in the first chapter:

IX.
…………………
…………………
…………………
[…]
    XIII. XIV.

.…..……………
.……..…………
.……..…………
[…]
XXXIX. XL. XLI.
.……..…………
.……..…………
.……..…………
(PUSHKIN, 1833, pp.8, 25)

Some of these omissions, like stanza IX, were a result of editorial/censorial altering of the original text before publication, so it could be argued that they again served an indexical function, signaling that some text had been deleted. However, many other omissions became a feature of the text's multilayered composition (see Tynianov, 1977; Lotman, 1983, p.136). In other words, they do not have any external referent, but acquire meaning solely within the text itself thus turning the absence of text into a "minus-text," a *meaningful omission*. Obviously, the cognitive mechanism is the same as in *Jabberwocky,* where the unknown words are perceived as a "minus-meaning."

Finally, in a text, some elements may not be shown/described but the reader would logically deduce them depending on their knowledge of the text's semiotic sphere. Formally, these elements do not exist in the text, but at the same time they are its intrinsic part, being located "between" the sequences of the film or the passages of the written text. Especially explosive become the endings in narratives because, as Lotman mentioned in one of his last papers, "What doesn't have an ending does not have any meaning either. Understanding [*osmyslenie*] is connected to the segmentation of the non-discrete space" (LOTMAN, 1994, p.417). The open or ambiguous endings and omissions from the text function as explosive elements, suggesting numerous interpretations. As is known, Lotman explored the notion of cultural explosion in his last books (LOTMAN, 2009; 2010), and described this phenomenon both as a change in the state of the system that provokes an unpredictable development and a situation when the information load of a text drastically increases. For the purpose of this paper it is important to reiterate that the apparent lack of information in texts does not hinder communication but on the contrary, stimulates meaning-generation.

Conclusive Remarks

There are a number of theories of nonsense and non-sense that propose different taxonomies of signs and have different ways to distinguish between signs and non-signs.[5] For example, the pansemiotic approach, advocated, among others, by Peirce,[6] does not accept the existence of a nonsemiotic sphere at all. However, such an ontological approach to meaning is by definition static and does not take into account the varieties of sign use that may defy strict categorization. As we have seen, a more contextual approach to non-sense seems to be more productive, that is, the one which departs from the question of *how* the signs function within a given sign system.

It has also been demonstrated that there cannot be one single formal structure that makes communication meaningful, be it logic, grammar, syntax, or semantics. If we take the earlier example with the Chomsky's meaningless phrase, *colorless green ideas sleep furiously*, we can easily reconstruct a context in which this phrase may be perfectly sensible. The presupposition of dialogue will make this phrase a textual entity, and therefore meaningful. Even more, we have seen that unknown, nonsensical signs and even the signs that "are not there" can acquire meaning as a part of a text.

On a larger scale, these examples manifest a predisposition of humans to reconstruct, correct and hypercorrect the received texts in order to produce meaning. This ability is apparently trained from a very early age[7] and is a product of our polyglot collective consciousness, as I argued elsewhere (SEMENENKO, 2016). This feature makes human beings unique among other species because in animal communication systems, new signs are not accepted ad hoc and require a long evolutionary process to take into effect. The animal semiosis does not include the possibility to semiotize or not to semiotize signals; they actively reject noise in communication as something that might jeopardize survival. Human collectives, on the other hand, have come to be able to make sense of practically anything, if there is the need for dialogue. At the same

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[5] For a concise account of main theories see Nöth (1995, pp.79-102).

[6] Peirce's famous definition in fact stems from a rather dialogical explanation of the flexibility of meaning of the sign: "It seems a strange thing, when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning; but the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the fact that the entire universe — not merely the universe of existents as a part, the universe which we are all accustomed to refer to as 'the truth' - that all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs" (PEIRCE, 1934, 5.448, fn).

[7] For example, as was shown in several studies, children may answer nonsensical closed questions, that is, questions which they do not understand (WATERMAN *et al.* 2000).

time, if the dialogue is rejected or deemed impossible by whatever reason, be it misunderstanding, political agenda, or anything else, not only texts, even whole cultures and languages can be perceived or proclaimed non-semiotic, meaningless and nonsensical.[8] The continuous fluctuating between these two extremes—the semiotizaton of the non-discrete reality (making sense) and the desemiotization of established semiotic systems (proclaiming something nonsense)—is a distinctive feature of human culture and our collective consciousness.

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[8] The word "barbarian," as is known, is an echoic term that reflects this very ideology of desemiotization of the Other devoid of language and, subsequently, culture.

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