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Nicolae-Sorin DRĂGAN\*

## Introduction. Semiosis in Communication: Knowing and Learning

“We are able not only ‘to do things with words’, but something more: words become the most important things we can produce”, wrote Solomon Marcus (1992, p. 155) nearly a quarter a century ago. Then such an observation might have seemed surprising, however today, in a world of global communication, its actuality can no longer be questioned. Our deliberate choice in favor of communication exercises (simulation of communication) against the cultivation of the naturalness of the communication act (the living experience of communication), became a social rule. How can we get out of the communication paradox without communication? How can the humanistic dimension of communication be saved in a society in which the instrumental dimension of communication prevails? (Wolton, 2012, p. 14). The appropriate solution would be understanding communication in Constantin Noica’s terms, as “*Eucharist*, because it means communion, it means a participation of each of us to Other’s thoughts and to what the Other has to say”, as Andrei Pleșu explained in a 2015 televised interview for the Romanian public TV channel. Such an approach prefigures the place where semiotics meets communication, that is where “meaning without communication is not possible” (Lotman, 2005, p. 218).

Semiotics and Communication are objects of interdisciplinary knowledge *par excellence*. They are met not only in the ambiguity of various definitions and approaches. Both are complementary ways of world mastery, of the *big game*, just like Solomon Marcus (2011) would say. For example, the semiotic reading that Paul Cobley (2014) weaves around a remarkable statement of Mikhail Bakhtin, “To be *means* to communicate”, brings us closer to a better understanding of the first Palo Alto axiom, *why it is not possible for us not to communicate*. In a similar way, John Deely (2009) celebrates a famous statement made by Charles Sanders Peirce, “man is a sign”, through a postmodern version: “the *human being* is a sign, a sign of what is known, felt, and imagined about the world, rightly or wrongly, at any given time” (p. 123). From this perspective it should not be surprising that the query on semiosis has become a central theme in many disciplines, even in those that just glimpsed at the fascination of semiotics (Eco, 2002).

This issue of the Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations aims to underline the importance of semiotic type queries in communication sciences. The papers included in this issue were initially presented at the first *Semiosis in Communication* conference,

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hosted by the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in June 2016. The first Semiosis in Communication conference was organized in partnership with Roehampton University, London, UK and under the auspices of the International Association for Semiotic Studies.

The experience itself of organization the event in Bucharest captures something of the semiotics nature. It's all about its integrative appearance, its ability to subtly and discreetly unite ideas, people and things, in a word *differences*. Semiotics keeps alive this potential to integrate various aspects of communication situations, assuming the fact that any act of communication and understanding involves, to some extent, elements of unpredictability (Lotman, 1990). Moreover, the phrase *Semiosis in Communication: Knowing and Learning*, captures a fundamental aspect of semiosis (the action of signs) namely its understanding as an "open process generated by the potential creativity of the interpretant" (Petrilli, 2015). Not only does each term of the expression open the game of interpretation, the *ad infinitum* series of interpretants, but any combinatorial structure of terms may determine a significant reality.

Paul Cobley, professor at Middlesex University, London and President of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Frederick Stjernfelt, professor at Aalborg University Copenhagen, Dario Martinelli, professor at Kaunas University of Technology and Director of the International Semiotics Institute and Andrew Stables, professor at University of Roehampton accepted to be keynote speakers and shared their professional experience in the opening sessions. Also, Massimo Leone, professor at University of Turin, Lars Elleström, professor at Linnæus University and Kristian Bankov, professor New Bulgarian University held plenary lectures.

The papers selected to appear in this issue explore the role of semiosis (interpretation) in communication and offer new opportunities for application of semiotics instruments that brings us closer to the understanding of some communicational phenomena, otherwise hard to approach and decipher. This special issue begins with an imaginary journey in an important moment in the history of Japan. "*High teas, high collars and high rise buildings in a 'high-context' culture: the semiotics of Japan's project of modernity*" by Nicolas Adam Cambridge catches the differentiated reception and mediation through communication of the transformations occurring in Japanese society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The study proposes a semiotic exploration of some communicational phenomena resulting from the meeting of traditional values of Japanese society with the values of Western modernity in expansion.

In the article "*Epistemology – the theory of knowledge or knowing? Appreciating Gregory Bateson's contribution to the cartography of human cognition*" Zdzislaw Wasik puts two epistemological approaches face to face, the metascientific epistemology and the psychophysiological epistemology, both of which may be regarded as semiotic cartography of human knowledge and cognition. By analysing the opposition between the static and dynamic aspect of human knowledge, Zdzislaw Wasik brings us closer to a refined understanding of Gregory Bateson's ideas, the initiator of the "Invisible College", as well as of Alfred Korzybski's influence on his work. Elżbieta Magdalena Wasik continues, in "*Gregory Bateson's ecology of mind and the understanding of human knowledge*", the foray into the world of Gregory Bateson's interdisciplinary research focusing on the relationship between communication and knowledge from an interactional, systemic perspective.

Ioana Corduneanu and Nicolae-Sorin Drăgan, in the article "*Semiotics of White Spaces on the Romanian Traditional Blouse, IA*", discuss the Romanian traditional blouse *IA* as a mul-

ti-dimensional semiotic object, with a complex semiotic structure, from the perspective of Lotman's semiotic theory of culture. In this way, Corduneanu and Drăgan open new perspectives on understanding complex issues of the problems and meanings coded in a particular area of culture, namely in folklore and in our ancient traditions.

In the paper "*Visual metaphors in Communication: Intertextual semiosis and déjà vu in print advertising*", Evripides Zantides addresses the issue of intertextuality in visual communication. Zantides draws attention to the multimodal behaviour of intertextuality in the construction of advertising messages, understood as a form of metaphoric semiosis in visual communication.

All the five articles included in this issues emphasize the interdisciplinary aspect of semiotic-type approaches and offers an insight into the complexity of meaning construction operations in various communication situations. We hope that these studies will inspire future avenues for research in semiotics and related fields.

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Nicolas Adam CAMBRIDGE\*

## High Teas, High Collars and High Rise Buildings in a ‘High-Context’ Culture: The Semiotics of Japan’s Project of Modernity

### Abstract

This article addresses a paradigm shift in Japanese society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – focusing on the encounters with Western culinary, sartorial and architectural practice experienced by a ‘high-context’ culture (Hall, 1976). The main discussion documents the differentiated reception of these changes – valorised by reformers for whom engaging with the outside world was key to their project of modernity, but treated with suspicion by members of the proletariat who feared for the purity of traditional Japanese values. The manner in which the resulting tensions were mediated through the print media and imagery of domestic visual culture is interrogated using a prism of semi-otic analysis and the findings located within a contemporary context to suggest that Roland Barthes’ analytical approach to the country as an ‘empire of signs’ (Barthes, 1982) retains its original traction.

**Keywords:** Meiji Japan; semiotics; fashion; food; architecture.

### Son of Yamato: Historical and Theoretical Contexts

In 1603 Japan closed its doors to the outside world as the *shogun* (military general) united warring factions and instigated a policy of *sakoku* (national isolation) so rigorously enforced that shipwrecked sailors who washed up on country’s shores were thrown back into the sea. There followed a period of two and a half centuries of socio-political ‘purdah’ until the arrival of the American fleet in Japanese waters in 1853 signalled the technological superiority of the West and initiated a crisis that led to the restoration of Emperor Meiji to the Chrysanthemum throne. A policy of *bunmei kaika* (civilisation & enlightenment) was introduced, designed to persuade the developed nations of the world of Japan’s fitness to join their ranks. The reformers established modern administrative institutions, encouraged new social practices and consumed myriad aspects of Western material culture, but many Japanese citizens feared exposure to so-called *bunmeibyō* (diseases of civilisation) – considered so virulent that some would pass beneath telegraph wires with fan held aloft to prevent even the shadow of a Western invention falling upon them. These tensions are cleverly articulated in a wood-block print, *Hakurai, Wamono: tawamure dogu choho no zu* (Humorous picture of the merits of goods), c.1873 by Utagawa Kuniyoshi<sup>1</sup>, which employs anthropomorphic imagery to comment on the appearance of foreign material culture in Japan (reproduced in

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Meech-Pekarik, 1986, plate 17). In certain cases the ‘combatants’ in the various contests depicted appear evenly matched – the idealism of the wood-block print vies with the realism of photography and native soap is no worse than its foreign equivalent – but only in the arena of diet is domestic rice clearly superior to the alternative. Otherwise the West is in the ascendancy as a rickshaw destroys the *kago* (palanquin), a post-box snatches the letter carrier’s cleft stick and a fabric umbrella proves more effective than the paper parasol<sup>2</sup>. Surprisingly the discipline of dress is only broached tangentially in the form of the visual pun in the bottom right-hand corner. In place of two people, the artist has drawn a kite (*tonbi*) and a mythical creature (*kappa*). The Japanese word for the bird of prey was used for the Inverness coat, while the latter term also served to describe a domestic raincoat.

In *The Decay of Lying* (1889) Oscar Wilde declaimed, “The whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. If you desire to see a Japanese effect stay at home and steep yourself in the works of certain Japanese artists.” While accurately skewering the Victorian desire for the exotic that underpinned a ‘cult of Japan’ that was sweep through Great Britain, Wilde also highlights the value of the native visual record as a source of documentary information. Accordingly, this article mobilizes primary research material derived from *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world), together with evidence culled from a number of cultural histories addressing Japan’s encounters with Western food, Western dress and Western architecture. As a quintessential ‘high-context’ culture (Hall, 1976), the Japanese were well attuned to implicit messages communicated across the three disciplines. The texts and images that record the reception of these aspects of material culture are examined using a theoretical framework of semiotic analysis, with the material presented in a format suggested by a Japanese aphorism:

*The son of Osaka spent his fortune on food*  
*The son of Kyoto spent his fortune on clothes*  
*The son of Edo spent his time looking at things*

(translated in Seidensticker, 1985)

The conclusion considers the manner in which the changes identified have impacted on Japan’s socio-cultural development – tracing the three aspects through the twentieth century and documenting examples of contemporary practice that suggest Roland Barthes’ characterisation of the country as an ‘empire of signs’ continues to enjoy traction as an analytical tour-de-force.

## **The Son of Osaka: Diet, Manners & Health**

Early commentators were quick to notice differences in culinary culture between Japan and their native lands. Writing in the eighteen-twenties – prior to the large-scale ingress of foreigners – one observed that “milk in any form, is unknown, or at least, strictly prohibited” (cited in von Siebold, 1973, p. 121). By the 1870s an influential disseminator of Western ideas, Fukuzawa Yukichi, was championing the dairy product as “one medicine for 10,000 ills” (reported in Narusawa, 1997, p. 335) having consumed it while recuperating from typhoid. Despite a rather tenuous grip on the science of nutrition, Fukuzawa produced a treatise on the benefits of meat-eating, and assiduously promoted a higher protein intake amongst