

Hegemonic signification from cultural semiotics point of view

Andreas Ventsel

Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu
Jakobi 2, 51014 Tartu, Estonia
e-mail: andreas.ventsel@ut.ee

Abstract. This paper attempts to integrate discourse theories, mainly the theory of hegemony by Essex School, and Tartu–Moscow School’s cultural semiotics, and sets for itself the modest task to point to the applicability of semiotic approach in political analysis. The so-called post-foundationalist view, that is common for discourse theories, is primarily characterized by the rejection of essentialist notions of ground for the social, and the inauguration of cultural and discursive characteristics (such as asymmetry and entropy; explosion; antagonism; insurmountable tension between organization and disorganization, regularity and irregularity, etc.) into the wider social scientific paradigm. Customarily, those characteristics have been attributed to contingent or peripheral events and phenomena that by nature do not belong to the social structure proper. Grounds for such ‘groundless’ contingencies are found in philosophy (Marchart), or for instance from the psychoanalytic notion of affect (Laclau). Many discourse theorists proceed here from Derrida’s position that in the process of signification there is an overabundance of meaning which renders final closure impossible (Howarth; Glynos). However, it seems that despite placing communication at the heart of their conceptions of discourse, the communicative character of constructing power relations remains undertheorized in those conceptions. This article attempts to approach the above mentioned problem by way of the concepts of communication and autocommunication (Lotman). The outcomes stemming from the latter are unavoidable, since the result of any possible research (text) itself belongs to culture or a larger discourse and operates as the organizing function of the latter. Hence, research practice and its results always need to be looked at as mutually affecting each other.

Up until the 1990s one could observe the expansion of semiotics into different disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. This was characterized by all sorts of pursuits in which semiotics was almost a suffix: for example, legal semiotics, theatre semiotics, cinema semiotics and so forth. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Pertti Ahonen (1987; 1993) wrote about a Copernican revolution in political science, above all impelled by adding the semiotic perspective into political science, which should eventually enrich the methodological underpinnings of the latter. If we take a look at the current situation, the perspective is very different: political semiotics, as a field and despite a small number of publications in this realm, some very good, has regressed more than progressed (Drechsler 2009: 74). A series of concrete analyses have been published that use semiotics as a supplementary methodology (Xing-Hua 2005; Zichermann 2006; Clark, Jacobs 2002), but less development, with some exceptions (Petrilli 2006; Ponzio 2006), towards a more general methodological break has come to pass.¹ One of the consequences of that may be “straw man” view of semiotics from other disciplines as a strictly structuralist endeavour, a science that attempts to reduce everything to static structures, neglecting the communicative and contextual character of the generation of meaning. The basis for this criticism was a one-sided reduction of semiotics to the structural linguistics of de Saussure and from there to the early works of Barthes (Chandler 2002; Culler 1975; Burgin 1986; Laclau 2004: 301–302; 2005: 110)². As a result, further developments in semiotics were left largely unnoticed by critics.

One of the modest purposes of the present paper is to sketch one possible approach to political analysis in which semiotics is able to, at least in the present author’s opinion, have an equal, effective and mutually complementary say in matters of discourse analysis, especially in the theory of hegemony. First I will try to explicate post-foundational approach. Describing major problems of political analyses — politics/

¹ The situation is better for advancing the interdisciplinary fusion of sociology and semiotics (Heiskala 2003).

² For the spread of Lotman’s ideas, and especially the problems accompanying this spread in the Soviet Union and outside, see Kull, Lotman 1995; Waldstein 2008.

political, power, I will simultaneously describe the main presumptions of post-foundational approach.

In the second part of the paper I will try to draw attention to the congenialities that unite the Tartu–Moscow semiotics of culture and the Essex theories of hegemony on both the ontological and the epistemological level. In my opinion these may turn out to be fruitful points of contact that would aid in expanding the toolkit used in political analyses.

And finally I will draw attention to some implications that arise for delineating the objects of political analyses and practical scientific activities once we place the concept of communication into the theoretical core of these analyses. Lotman’s communication model, which includes also auto-communication model in communication process, affords, in author’s opinion, to elaborate one theoretical presumption for post-foundational problem of so-called “ground for groundless”. This is because the result of any possible research (text) itself belongs to culture or a larger discourse and operates as the organizing function of the latter.

Since there have been extensive papers published on concrete analyses based on cultural semiotics and the theory of hegemony (Selg, Ventsel 2008, 2010; Ventsel 2009), this paper will mostly focus on explicating methodological issues.

1. Post-foundational approach in political science

The term ‘post-foundational approach’ includes different kinds of academic research programs. But they all share some fundamental principles — post-foundational approaches do not perceive objects as given, or as epiphenomena of some basic metaphysical principle, but as constructions; this also leads to giving up the presumption of a “natural order” of things, and the actualisation of the question of the contingent nature of every “order” (Marchart 2007). And this significant reality or so-called “order” is constituted through communication. It is for these

reasons that questions such as: What is meaning? How does it arise in communication? What are its consequences for the general constitution of society? etc are the focus of post-foundational approaches. This is why cultural factors like the influence of language, values, memory etc become relevant for studying these processes.

Post-foundationalism must not be confused with anti-foundationalism or a vulgar and today somewhat out-dated “anything goes” postmodernism, since a post-foundational approach does not to attempt to erase completely such figures of ground, but to weaken their ontological status.

The ontological weakening of ground does not lead to the assumption of total absence of all grounds, but rather to the assumption of the impossibility of final ground, which is something entirely different as it implies an increased awareness of, on the one hand, contingency and, on the other, the political as the moment of partial and always, in the last instance, unsuccessful grounding. (Marchart 2007: 2)

Such endless play between ground and groundless also suggests accepting the necessity of decision (premised upon ontological undecidability) and being aware of division, discord, and antagonism, as every decision — since it cannot be based on a stable ground, nor will it be taken in the solitary vacuum of complete groundlessness — will always be confronted with competing claims and forces (Marchart 2007: 3).

Concerning the main topic of the present paper — politics — the post-foundationalist approach is predicated on political activity always taking place in sedimented layers of traditions that are ungrounded, flexible and changeable. It means that the narrow definition of politics (the practice of government) has been abandoned and we have to differentiate between the concept of politics and a concept of the political.³

‘Politics’ refers primarily to politics as a specific field, as particular institutions and institutionalized activities that are usually thought of as being part of politics — for example, what politicians do in the

³ The roots of this distinction in contemporary political thought can be retraced to Paul Ricoeur’s (1965[1956]) distinction between politics and the political, and to Carl Schmitt’s conception of the political (Schmitt 1996[1936]).

parliaments, or in the rhetoric of pre-election debates and so on. In other words, the things about which we read in the political supplements of daily newspapers. ‘Political’, on the other hand, refers mainly to the existence of permanent antagonisms or conflicts in society that can never be completely resolved and which are thus present in any act of signification.

By ‘the political’ I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by ‘politics’ I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political. (Mouffe 2005: 9)

If discovering the ultimate principle of the constitution of a society was possible, politics would disappear. Why? Because then there would be nothing left besides administrative management and the fulfilment of some ultimate plan, which is something experienced during the Soviet period at least on the rhetorical level. This would mean that politics as a practice of trying to find a balance between different social forces would become meaningless.

As Laclau has said, “the problem of the political is the problem of the institution of the social, that is, of the definition and articulation of social relations in a field criss-crossed with antagonism” (Laclau, Mouffe 1985: 153). This is because, as Oliver Marchart (2007: 5–6) writes, the political is included potentially in every social practice of signification. This is due to the logic of certain signification processes, which do not only appear in political discourse, but also in other fields that constitute social life. Thus politics can always be understood as an expression of the power of discourses. In the following I try to clarify the post-foundationalist approach in political science in the context of the concept of power.

1.1. Post-foundational point of view of power

This brings us directly to the need to conceptualise the relations between power and politics. In searching for an answer, post-foundational

approach consciously moves away from the essentialist or positivist approaches to power (the best-known of which would be liberalism and Marxism) that define power as a certain “thing”. Such “things” have the peculiarity that they can, at least in principle, be *divided* in one way or the other; they are characterised by their distributive nature, or in other words: one can discuss the *possession* or *non-possession* of things — and one can draw a clear boundary between those units that/who *have* particular things and those that/who *do not*. In principle, here we see an approach that was described above as characteristic of positivist social science: power is conceptualised as a given (positive) and defined fact. Thus these approaches see as their biggest problem the normative “justification” (liberalism) or “critique” (Marxism) of this “reification of power”. Plainly, such operations would probably not be possible with *relations* and *processes*.

The basis for the semiotic view of the theory of hegemony is, instead, the tradition that has developed through Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony (Gramsci 1971) and Michel Foucault’s approach to “discourse” and “power” (Foucault 1980, 1990). For Gramsci, hegemony is not something that could be described by the characteristics of power, coercion or domination (*dominio*). It is dependent, instead, on the spontaneous willingness of subjected subjects to agree with the ideas produced by intellectuals. It should be emphasized that Gramsci does not think of the legitimisation of hegemonic formations as a consequence of propaganda or brainwashing, nor is it explainable merely as a calculation of rational interests. Rather all these factors are seen to have a part in forming that unity.

As is well known, Foucault does not consider power to be only an instrument of repression — rather, power is what makes things and talking about things possible. Power does not only say “no” but it produces things, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourses (Foucault 1980: 37). For the most part, the mechanisms of the functioning of power are not based on justice, law and the threat of punishment, but rather on techniques, ideals that express normality and various mechanisms of control (Foucault 1990: 89–90). Thus

Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (Foucault 1990: 92–93)

In the light of the above, the old questions, such as “Who has power?” or “Who are repressed by power?” lose their former acuity. The described approach draws attention to analysing hidden power relations, especially the power of discourse, as opposed to the previous object of analysis of the social scientists — the relations between the state and its administrative apparatus, and the people. Hegemony becomes the central concept for defining political discourse. This means that any hegemony or relationship of power is understood here not as direct influence — the best example of which would be pure physical violence — but as always mediated by signs; that is, semiotic mediation. And since imposing a hegemonic relationship is in no way reducible to a single ground, such as for example in Marxism’s resort to the nature of economic relationships, but instead, showing that all the factors that shape human existence have their role to play, it follows that the ‘semiotics of culture’ approach is in a good position to explain hegemonic processes.

From a post-foundationalist or anti-essentialist perspective, power relations are not something pre-given; instead, they are constructed through social and cultural meanings. This means that all power relations are discursive relations and “objectivity” as such is constructed specifically in discourse (Laclau 2005: 68). It is important that the field of application of the concept of discourse is not only limited to writing or speech, but that it refers to any complex of elements where relations play a constitutive role (*ibid.*). For Laclau, the question of social and political reality thus boils down to the question of the constitution of discourse. According to Laclau, hegemony should be interpreted only

on the basis of discourse: a hegemonic relationship is nothing other than an articulation of meanings, a particular logic of the signification process. However, some additional general remarks on the relations between discourse and power are in order.

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to clarify that hegemonic discourse does not only consider the discourses of those *in* power. The well-known discourse theoretician Norman Fairclough (1992: 64) distinguishes analytically the following relation complexes for discursive power: Power *of* discourse; Power *in* discourse; Power *over* discourse. In the present context, only the latter distinction is relevant: power over discourse. Both power *of* discourse and power *in* discourse primarily deal with reproduction and the way different signification systems manipulate with people. The problem is that the subject has been left with no freedom whatsoever — the reproduction of discourse dominates over change, contest, and subjectivity. This problem — the disappearance of the so-called subject as an agent — has haunted both early Foucault and the structuralists (Althusser) (Fairclough 1992: 64).

In *On Populist Reason* Laclau describes the construction of ‘the people’ and its populist origin. According to him, populism is one of the ways that the hegemonic logic of signification may occur and is not at all a stranger to democratic social organization and free media (Laclau 2005). This means that opposing discourses that are alternative to the dominant discourse could have the same logic of signification. Instead of viewing reality as something determined by discourse, the notion of “power over discourse” leads us to ask who produces dominant discourses, and who tries to challenge and transform them:

As meanings are not fixed, the process of constructing and reproducing discourses is not automatic or inevitable, but involves choice. On the other hand, those placed in a subordinated position often develop counter discourses as forms of resistance in order to bring the dominant system of meaning into question and change it. (Raik 2003: 26)

(Re)production of dominant meanings can take the form of the exercise of, or struggle for, power; “discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault 1980: 52–53).

Above I provided a general sketch of the ways in which the primary topic of political analyses — the problem of power — is interpreted within the post-foundationalist tradition. The semiotic approach to power developed below is closely related to the post-foundationalist view. In what follows, I will briefly describe the ways in which semiotics could play a role in political analyses, and the ontological and epistemological levels of such an approach.

2. Toward a semiotic theory of hegemony

An interdisciplinary connection between discourse theory and semiotics of culture is raised in some general issues, primarily associated with the mutual relations between different disciplines, their hierarchy, and the identity of the object of research. Here I would like to highlight two primary questions.

First, in what way does the object of research correlate with the method of research, that is, to what extent do research methods not only explain, but also constitute and construct the object being studied? The present approach is well aware of these difficulties and acknowledges that in essence this is an *ad hoc* approach, a creation of a synthesized research language. Discourse theory and semiotics of culture have acknowledged programmatically that both are involved in creating an *ad hoc* research method (Wodak, Meyer 2001; Ivanov *et al.* 1998). This means that the researcher is aware of the correlation between cultural diversity and the diversity of the disciplinary and hybrid meta-languages that attempt to describe it.

Second, to what degree does the identity of the disciplines themselves persist in the situation where the boundaries between different disciplines have become diffuse? This is especially a problem when we consider the fact that the primary source of interdisciplinary approaches is the powerlessness of older scientific languages in coming to grips with explaining the diversity of the world, rather than a mere unification of different disciplines (Barthes 1980). As Peeter Torop (2009: 26) writes,

the necessity of dealing with problems of ontology and epistemology is above all generated by a dialogue on a sub-disciplinary level, since the intermingling of theories and meta-languages may not develop into a new synthesis or identity.

The next section sets as its goal the avoidance of this possible confusion and attempts to distinguish between the ontological and the epistemological level in the semiotic theory of hegemony.

2.1. Ontological premises

The impossibility/ untranslatability of the closure

Poststructuralist or post-foundationalist ontology is not reducible to an inventory of the kinds of things in the world. One of its concerns is the different *kinds* of things in the world, but more importantly it is concerned with the *being* of these things (Glynos, Howarth 2007). These versions of ontology have at the very roots of their approach the so-called transcendental turn of modern philosophy (usually associated with the works of Immanuel Kant). The transcendental turn's breakthrough is generally considered to consist in redirecting the central attention of analysis from facts to their conditions of possibility. The general thesis of this approach is that any perception, thinking or acting, presupposes some structuration of the field of meanings that precedes any factual immediacy (Laclau 1993).

For the interdisciplinary approach that has been developed elsewhere (Selg, Ventsel 2008, 2010; Ventsel 2009), it is relevant that both semiotics of culture and the theory of hegemony of the Essex school are derived, to a certain extent, from the linguistic tradition of Saussure, and thus view signification as a system of differences. Semiotics of culture has developed from the semiotics of language by way of the semiotics of text, culminating in today's semiotics of the semiosphere (Portis-Winner 1999; Torop 2003, 2009). Similarly, many discourse theorists have acknowledged the linguistic origin of their theoretical

conceptions, primarily by way of the tradition stemming from the linguistic theories of Benveniste and Saussure that have later developed into different approaches in discourse analysis (Wodak, Meyer 2001; Seriot 1999; Laclau 1993).

Both approaches view signification on the basis of a total system. Nevertheless, while being aware of the inevitable closure of this imaginary totality, both Tartu–Moscow semiotics of culture and Essex discourse theory are simultaneously aware that this significant totality is never closed off entirely, but only represents the researcher's temporary operational construction in an endless semiosis. This means that any field of discursive social relations (Laclau's terminology) or text (Lotman's terminology) is marked by radical contingency, where radical contingency refers to the inherent (as opposed to accidental) instability of an object's identity. The significance of *radical* or *ontological* contingency is highlighted when contrasted with *empirical* or *ontic* contingency, as evident in Bhaskar's critical realism. By empirical contingency we aim to capture a sense of possibility: the possibility that contingency *may* be absorbed by a higher order process (Glynos, Howarth 2007). According to this position, the relativist nature of our conception of objects does not lead to the relativization of objective knowledge. Radical contingency opposes empirical contingency's sense of possibility with a sense of *impossibility*: the *constitutive* failure of any objectivity to attain a full identity⁴. Other formulations of radical contingency as an ontological premise include 'lack in the Other' (Lacan), 'structural undecidability' (Derrida), and so on, all of which question the idea of a fully constituted essence of a practice, regime or object, in the name of an irreducible negativity that cannot be reabsorbed (Coole 2000).

For the semiotics of culture as well as for the theory of hegemony of the Essex School, untranslatability is a constitutive condition of meaning and thus of social communication. Laclau approaches this point

⁴ Glynos, Jason; Howarth, David. Interpretations, mechanisms and logics. Presentation at 1st IDA World Conference, September 8–10, 2008, Roskilde University, Denmark; p.15.

with the concepts of antagonism and the logic of difference/ equivalence. In an actual process of signification, these two logics are always simultaneously present, and are not completely reducible to one another due to their antagonistic nature. One of the logics may simply be more prevalent than the other.

For Lotman it is the result of the inevitable dichotomy between continuous and discrete coding systems.⁵ According to Lotman, a basic precondition for any generation of meaning is (at least) this dual coding (Lotman 2004b). By language, Lotman understands “every system that serves the purpose of facilitating communication between two or several individuals” (Lotman 1977: 14). On the most fundamental level, there is coding between discrete and continuous systems of coding. First is the formation of text; this comes together like linear chains of linked segments (Lotman 2001[1978]: 36). In Laclau’s vocabulary this is a case of the logic of difference. In a continuous coding system the meaning is organized neither in a linear nor in a temporal sequence, but is “washed over” the n-dimension semantic space of a given text. We may have difficulty in isolating its component signs, and this task smacks of artificiality (Lotman 2001[1978]: 36). In Laclau’s vocabulary this is a case of logic of equivalence.

These languages are, moreover, mutually completely *untranslatable* into one another. This means that, similarly to Laclau, Lotman also perceives the impossibility of a final closure of a meaningful structure — that is, radical contingency — as a primary ontological property. This structural openness immediately raises the problem of the status of the object under study, and leads us to epistemological questions — how

⁵ For this reason, for the purposes of the approach developed in this work, political is not some regional category in cultural processes, but is in some sense present (even if only latently), in every structure of signification, in the form of an antagonism. In the same manner, “culture” does not refer only to forms of art — to so-called ‘high culture’. From the perspective of the semiotics of culture, restricting culture in such a manner would be meaningless, since (minimally) two semiotic mechanisms (languages) constitute the principle of construction for any semiotic phenomenon; similarly, for a non-administrative model of politics, reducing political to that region of society that consists of governmental activities would be limiting in the extreme.

and with what means of analysis can we study social phenomena in a condition of radical contingency?

2.2. Epistemological premises

Text/discourse

It may be argued that in earlier linguistics of text, discourse indicated a concrete, socially presented text or speech and “text” referred to the abstract structures of discourse. Simplifying somewhat, we can say that in this case discourse corresponds to *parole* and text corresponds to *langue* (see Dijk 1998: 194–195). The present approach has abandoned this distinction. Text and discourse are here approached by way of their similar functional properties that supplement these conceptions in semiotics of culture and in the Essex theory of hegemony.

In order to rectify this situation, one needs to approach text/ discourse as a paradoxical phenomenon. It is, on the one hand, a unity, a closed totality with a clear outline — otherwise it would not even be perceptible as a text/ discourse — but it is also a totality that is born out of an open, uncountable multitude of heterogeneous and multi-faceted components. Possibilities for its interpretation cannot be forced into pre-given structures because of the inexhaustible potentialities of the interactions between the components and sources that comprise it. According to semiotics of culture, “text is a carrier of total meaning and total function (if we distinguish between the viewpoints of the researcher and the bearer of culture, the text is the bearer of total function for the former and the bearer of total meaning for the latter). Regarded in this manner, it can be treated as the basic element (unit) of culture” (Ivanov *et al.* 1998: 3.0.0). The essence of culture is semiotic, as it is based on information and communication. The concept of text functions on two methodological levels: it signifies 1) natural textual objects (for example, books) and 2) *textualizable* objects (culture) (Ivanov *et al.* 1998: 3.1.0). The textual aspect of textual analysis means working with

clearly delineated sign systems, texts or collections of texts, whereas the processual aspect of textual analysis presumes delineation, the creation or reconstruction of totalities (Torop 2009: 35). Text and textualization signify that the object of analysis has been delineated, and the latter (the frame) in its own turn enables one to (operationally) structure the object (*ibid.*). This makes it possible to distinguish between the different structural levels of the object and to study the mechanisms of translation between them. In this way the concrete and the abstract, the static and the dynamic aspect are all assembled into the concept of text. In his later works, Lotman replaces the concept of text with that of the semiosphere, which better highlights the dynamic aspects of culture — every semiosphere can be studied as a separate totality, but now there is an explicit methodological principle that every totality in culture that can be analysed is simultaneously part of a larger totality (Torop 2003: 335–336). This results in a seamless dialogue between parts and wholes, and in the dynamics of the total dimension. Nevertheless, for the semiotics of culture, text has remained the central concept, since as a concept it can refer to both a concrete artefact and an invisible abstract totality (as a mental text in the consciousness or sub-consciousness) (Torop 2009: 35).

Functionally similar to the treatment of text/ semiosphere in the semiotics of culture, Laclau and the Essex school approach discourse as a delineated, significant totality. Here Laclau's position is opposed to Foucault's treatment of discourse. The first criticism is about the distinction between discourse and what is left outside discourse. In his so-called archaeological period, Foucault still distinguishes between 1) the rules of formation of discourse, the conditions that the distribution of the elements of the formation of discourse are subject to (objects, statements, topics) and 2) external conditions of discursive formations, which Foucault calls "primary" relationships. The latter can be described as residing between institutions, techniques, social forms etc., independently of discourse or objects of discourse (Foucault 2002). For Laclau discourse is not an object among many, as it is for instance for the earlier Foucault, but rather the *primary* terrain of objectivity as such

(Laclau 2005a: 68). Discourse as the totality of meanings overcomes the distinction between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic. For Laclau, nothing is constituted outside discourse. If discourse is to be understood as a historically specific system of meanings that is embedded in a set of social practices, institutions and organisations (Howarth, Stavrakakis 2000), it follows that the entirety of human reality is meaningful and constituted by norms, systems, rules and shared truths, reproduced and transformed through social activity.

The second criticism pertains to the problem of the unity of discourse. In his later, so-called genealogical period, Foucault's position was that the principle for the unity of a discursive formation cannot be discovered from referring to the same object, from the unitary style in producing utterances, from the stability of concepts nor from referring to a unitary topic, but only from what he called "regularity in dispersion" — that is, a stability in external relations between elements that are not subordinate to any basic or essential principle of structuration (Foucault 1990). But if the regularity of the dispersion is the only principle for the unity of a discursive formation, the question remains about the boundaries between discursive formations, a question for which Foucault could at that phase provide no precise answer (Laclau 1993: 434). So the problem of the constitution of social and political reality becomes for Laclau the problem of the *constitution of discourse*.⁶ This closing up into a significant totality should be understood as a temporary equilibrium between the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence in the process of signification (Laclau, Mouffe 1985: 112). This closing off, albeit temporary, is nevertheless inevitable, since otherwise there would be no process of signification and thus no meaning (Laclau 1996). It is this partial fastening of the relations between the 'signifier' and the

⁶ On the other hand, Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School retain "the ontological separation between different types of social practice, whether understood as ideological, sociological, economic or political. Discourse theorists, by contrast, affirm the discursive character of all social practices and objects, and reject the idea that ideological practices simply constitute one area or 'region' of social relations" (Howarth, Stavrakakis 2000: 4).

‘signified’ (according to one English translation of Saussure — A.V.) that is called “hegemony” (Laclau 1993: 436).

2.3. Translation as a means of analysis

In addition to several functional similarities between Lotman’s and Laclau’s theoretical positions — between the equivalent logic of signification and continuous coding, text and discourse, asymmetry and heterogeneity, but also the treatment of the concept of boundary — Laclau’s theory of hegemony is indebted to the psychoanalytic tradition, especially to its Lacanian version. Proceeding from Derrida’s basic idea of deconstruction that different possible relations between structural elements cannot be decided about by proceeding only from themselves, it follows that (1) the actually existing configuration is essentially contingent; (2) that it cannot be explained by the structure itself, but only by way of a force that necessarily has to be *partially* external to the structure. It is the role of hegemonic power that Laclau associates with Lacan’s concept of affect. Falling into the convolutions of psychoanalysis may be considered as the primary weakness of Laclau’s theory of hegemony, as it bars off concrete empirical analyses of political discourse.

This leads us to another problem with respect to analyzability. According to Laclau, any movement from one hegemonic formation to another is always through a radical break, as a creation *ex nihilo*. This does not entail that all the elements of the discourse will be entirely new, but that the name of the discourse, the “empty signifier” around which the new formation is reconstructed, does not derive its central role from any logic that was already in operation in the previous situation (Laclau 2005: 228). It seems to me that Laclau rather stays at the level of anti-foundationalism. I do not mean to claim that translation from one formation to another is determined by some pre-given structural transformation, but if we proceed from the premise that communication is possible, it appears that some historico-culturally contingent codes and mechanisms of translation occur with higher probability

than others. By translating this problem into the theoretical framework and vocabulary of semiotics of culture we may say that all meanings in culture are generated by the combined effect of different languages and levels of texts, and in reality they do not exist as isolable entities, but enter into complex mutual relations by communicating (Ivanov *et al.* 1998: 1.0.0). This means that while absolutely identical translation between these different cultural languages (logics of signification) into one another is impossible in principle, an *approximate* translation is possible and operates as a generator of new information (Lotman 2004a). The invariant translation/ filtering function of the boundary is materialized in different ways on different levels. At the level of the semiosphere it represents the division of self from other, the filtration of external communications and the translation thereof into its own language, as well as the transformation of external non-communication into communications, that is, the semiotization of incoming materials and the transformation of the latter into information (Lotman 2005a: 210). An appreciation of internal and external space is not fixed. The *very fact of the presence of a boundary* is significant (Lotman 2005a: 213). A pair of mutually non-juxtaposable signifying elements, between which, thanks to the context they share, a relationship of adequacy is established, form a semantic trope (Lotman 2001: 37). This means that tropes are not external ornaments, something applied to a thought from the outside — they constitute the essence of creative thinking, and their functions extend beyond art (Lotman 2001: 37). These tropes and strategies of translation do not appear completely *ex nihilo* but are in some particular relationship with cultural languages prevalent in the culture, and with the hierarchy of cultural texts. This is revealed especially in the fact that certain ideological systems can connect the germ that generates culture precisely to something external, the non-organized sphere, opposing to it the internal, ordered field as a culturally lifeless one (Ivanov *et al.* 1998: 1.3.0)⁷. Let's give a few examples from the arsenal of cultural semiotics.

⁷ This is an objection against Laclau's claim that any meaningful signification needs an affect as an anchor point which stops the play between syntagmatic and

Dominant text

One of the direct consequences of the intersection of different texts are the cases where the invading text *subordinates* the prospects of the earlier text to generate new meanings. The typical consequence of an invasion of an alien text is “text-in-text”, in which case the alien text takes on a series of functions: to be a catalyst for meaning, to change the character of primary signification, to remain unnoticed (Lotman 2004c: 66). In the present context, we will focus on the first two functions. In such a case, the basis for the generation of meaning is the switch, on the basis of some internal structural principle, from one system of semiotic understanding of text to another (Lotman 2004c: 66). There is an exchange of the encoding language required for translation, which in its turn brings about a rearrangement of prior textual structures. It is easy to notice here the appearance of hegemonic relations in the process of signification — the intruding text may acquire a dominant position in discourse and start determining the ways other texts can be interpreted. The meaningful totality is built up through translating several independent structures into a mutual relation of equivalence through the dominant text. Thus during the 1940s the classic works of Marxism-Leninism became dominant, and the appearance of and possibilities for interpreting other texts in the public circulation of texts became subordinated. During the Soviet period, there was a widespread practice of adding editorial instructions for the reader for interpreting the book, interspersed with quotes from the classics of communism, that were supposed to “help” the reader to the “right” track. This is a good example of the appearance of a dominant text in the situation of a “text within text”. In the end, these formed a sort of language that became the basis for new codings. A text (in this instance, a particular piece of Marxism-Leninism) can, during further communication, become part

associative poles of language. Otherwise there is no signification at all (Laclau 2004: 302–303). As a result, Laclau does not pay any theoretical attention to the fact that the space outside of the text is itself hierarchical and participates actively in the process of textual generation.

of the domain of the encoding language, that is, it itself becomes an element in the encoding language from which new texts are formed (Lotman 1977: 51–53).

Dominant language

One of the grounding principles in the semiotics of culture is that a text is never encoded in a single language, and different kinds of organization can be perceived behind the text. In the present context, however, we are interested in cases where “in general the text has been encoded with some dominant code, besides which we can find local (second, third level) encodings” (Lotman 2005b: 427). From the perspective of the self-reflection of the ideologies of political regimes (especially in totalitarian societies), politics performed the subordinating function *par excellence*, which is expressed in the dominant role of the political dimension with respect to other fields that constitute the society (such as philosophy, religion, aesthetics, ethics, justice, etc.) (Kupina 1995: 13–15; Ventsel 2009). In a situation of signification, one dominant language — code — subordinates other means of coding, thereby uniting different signifiers into a chain of equivalence. Hegemony is imposed by cutting off other codes and by the expansion of the chain of equivalence of the signifiers.

Code-Text

We can also distinguish principles of organization in the process of signification that operate in a more concealed manner. One such principle is the code-text — the intermediary between language and text (Lotman 2005b: 425). A code-text is not an abstract collection of rules required for constructing a text, but a syntagmatically constructed totality, an organized structure of signs that is not expressed directly, but is realized as variants in the lower level texts in the hierarchy of the culture

(Lotman 2005b: 425). It is especially common for cultures with a mythological orientation. For an external observer, it may be both ambivalent and polyvalent, can be divided into a paradigm of equivalent yet different meanings, or again into a system of antonymic oppositions, but for the inhabitants of the culture “the code-text is nevertheless monolithic, compact and unambiguous [...] organizing their memories and defining the limits to the possible variations of the text” (Lotman 2005b: 426). The hegemonic logic of the code-text is in operation in a more concealed manner than in previous coding strategies. By imposing specific mutual relationships between the positions of the subjects and the conditions for their positions, it functions as a dominant process of signification, since it establishes some positions as active and others as passive, allows some positions to engage in relations with other elements in the text and denies this to other positions, approximately determines how to depict the beginning and the end of the narrative, etc. A good example is provided by the hidden code-textual structure of soviet realist literature, about which the noted literary scholar Katarina Clark (1981) has written that only a single novel was written in the socialist-realist vein — M. Gorky’s “The Mother”. All the socialist-realist literature that followed was but variants of this invariant code-text.

Here it is important to emphasize that as the culture functions and as new texts are generated or meta-descriptions written for the purpose of research, every sign of the code-text can appear as a paradigm (Lotman 2005b: 426) in the same manner as the above-mentioned transformation of text into language.

In the above sections I attempted to indicate the main ontological and epistemological congenialities between the semiotics of culture and the theory of hegemony of the Essex school that could operate as a starting point toward a semiotic theory of hegemony. In the last section, I would like to draw attention to some methodological difficulties that come with this sort of an approach, the acknowledgement of which could lay the basis for the recognition that only a dialogue between qualitative (including semiotic) and empirical-positivist methods can result in more effective analyses of the political.

3. Political analysis as auto-communicational process

Approaching a given object of study as a communication-based discourse/text raises a number of problems pertaining to philosophy of science. We may inquire after the ontological status of theory — in what ways does theory generate reality and to what extent can we consider such a generation as scientific?

In the empiricist philosophy of science it was assumed that theoretical laws or models are too weak in the social sciences (as compared to those of the natural sciences). This was used to explain why results in the social sciences never acquire the capacity for prediction characteristic of the natural sciences. In post-empiricist philosophy of science, to the contrary, it is argued that the explanatory premises of the social sciences are too rigid. By firmly fixating the agents' plans and goals, they fail to take into consideration, first, that agents are reflective beings capable of learning, and second, that what is important is not just the agents' own self-description but also the way others understand the significance of their actions (Bohman 1991: 7).

I will attempt to approach this methodological problem by proceeding from the theoretical positions of the Tartu–Moscow School and especially those of Lotman, positions that may be called semiotics of communication. However, I will not be focussing here on the trivial argument about the differences in the codes of the addresser and the addressee that excludes the possibility of identical meanings in the communicative process. Primarily, I will attempt to observe this problem based on two different models of communication internal to any culture — from the autocommunicative 'I—I' and the communicative 'I—s/he' models. It is important to emphasize that “for culture to exist as a mechanism organizing the collective personality with common memory and collective consciousness, there must be present a pair of semiotic systems with the consequent possibility of text translation” (Lotman 2001: 34). “Actual cultures, like artistic text, are constructed on the principle of pendulum-like swings between these systems” (*ibid.*).

Thus any analysis of politics, that is, a text, will appear at the field of tension between these two models of communication. This will bring about significant effects 1) for political analysis as a model of reality (the object being studied); 2) to the language used for coding the model (to the theoretical meta-language) and 3) for the generator of the text (for the researcher who constructs the model). As a result, the multi-layered and semiotically heterogeneous text that is capable of complex relations with both the cultural context that surrounds it as well as the reader/the public, ceases to be an elementary message sent from the addresser to the addressee.

Let's take a closer look at these two models of communication. The 'I—s/he' system allows one merely to transmit a constant quantity of information, whereas the 'I—I' system qualitatively transforms the information, and this leads to a restructuring of the actual 'I' itself. In the first system the addresser transmits a message to another person, the addressee, but both the code and the message remain the same in the course of the act.

In the second system, while communicating with him/herself, the addresser inwardly reconstructs his/her essence, since the essence of a personality may be thought of as an individual set of socially significant codes, and this set changes during the act of communication. (Lotman 2001: 22)

Functionally speaking, a text is used as a code and not a message when it does not add to the information we already have, but when it transforms the self-understanding of the person who has engendered the text and when it transfers an already existing message into a new system of meanings (Lotman 2001: 30). This is the result of introducing a supplementary, secondary code: the original message is recoded into elements of its structure and it thereby acquires the features of a *new* message (Lotman 2001: 22).

Under these conditions, the socio-communicative function of the text will become more complex. In addition to 1) the function of transmitting information, the text will 2) function as collective cultural memory. In this role, the text manifests, on the one hand, a capacity for constant supplementation; yet on the other hand it manifests the

capacity for actualizing some aspects of the information contained in it, and for temporarily or completely forgetting other aspects (Lotman 2002: 160). Any political analysis will supplement a prior research tradition yet, as a result, will also change it, since adding a new element into the tradition will transform the nature of the relationships that constitute the prior tradition. This can happen precisely because of the simultaneous activity of auto-communication and communication in the act of communication, because 3) the text appears simultaneously in the role of the medium, helping to reshape the personality of the readers, change their structural self-orientation and relations to meta-cultural constructs” (Lotman 2002: 160). We can treat the researcher as the reader who, by constructing the text (political analysis), simultaneously consumes it, and through this auto-communicative process inserts a different code into the text, for example by making a critical overview of what has been done before. Doing this, researchers transform their own previous codes. In this last instance we are concerned not merely with a message in a language, but also a message about language, a message in which the interest is shifted on to its language (Lotman 2001: 15).

And, finally, we can also distinguish 4) the communication between text and its cultural context. The relationship a text has to its cultural context may be either metaphorical or metonymic. A good example of the first one is the *The History of the Communist Party of Soviet Union. Short Course (Party Short Course 1939 [1938])* that circulated during the Stalinist period as the sole correct treatment of history, in which one specific text is perceived as replacing the entire context, as being equivalent to the entire cultural context. In cases of metonymy, the text represents context as a part represents the whole. An example would be the various contemporary treatments of that particular era. But in any case we have here a certain (self-)description of the context, where the text participates not as an agent of an act of communication, but as its full and equal participant, as a source or receiver of information (Lotman 2002: 161). And by this participation it always already changes the context.

The processual nature of communication and its auto-communicative characteristics bring about irreversible consequences in the generation of meaning. It may be argued that in semiotics the relationship *A equals A* is invalid, meaning that the principle that forms the basis of classical logic has been abandoned. In semiotics, a fact (a significantly bounded text) never appears in its full positivity, but is always the result or the product of deciphering. The text is not only a generator of new meanings, but also a condenser of cultural memory. It is important to stress that for the perceiver a text is always a metonymy of a reconstructed integral meaning, a discrete sign of a non-discrete essence (Lotman 2001: 18). Once we proceed from the framework presented here, however, we must approach facts as meaningful units from an entirely different perspective. It does not suffice to say that every fact is always loaded with theory — this would only touch upon the relationship between scientific meta-language and object-language. By referring to the three functions of text, we may pose a counter-question: do I have to take a critical look back at the research I have already conducted? It is entirely conceivable that the theoretical principles to which I have subjected data collection and analysis are entirely valid and thus produce deductively valid results. But once we consider that these principles themselves have resulted from communication and can only be valid during the conditions of communication (because how else could we even talk about them), it appears that the watershed is more fundamental — no meaning can ever become completely stabilised due to its multilingual constitution and because of its retrospectivity. Texts that preserve their cultural activity reveal a capacity to accumulate information, that is, a capacity for memory — this means that it is also the memory of all its interpretations, and what is more, it is also the memory of all those historical events which occurred outside the text but with which the text can evoke associations. And this is what gives the text new meanings (Lotman 2001: 18–19).

Therefore an identical reconstruction of a semiotic whole is impossible in principle. It will always be a model of the new. A reconstruction of a lost language is always a creation of a new language, not the

restoration of the old, even if it does seem like a restoration from the perspective of the culture's self-consciousness. But this recollection/reconstruction of the old is but a subjective phenomenon from the present perspective (Lotman 2005a: 215). If we consider that any political analysis is a communicative event, it does appear that we must pay full theoretical attention to these consequences in the relationship between meta-languages and object-languages.

Conclusion

Things could always be otherwise and therefore every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. "It is in that sense that [exclusion] can be called 'political' since it is the expression of a particular structure of power relations" (Mouffe 2005: 18). This form of exclusion is what we call 'hegemonic practices' and every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, that is, "practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony" (Mouffe 2005: 18). Rephrasing this in the terminology of semiotics of culture we may say that every (dis)articulating process is a process of translation, and it depends on the nature of this process within cultural context whether the process acquires a hegemonic status or not. Therefore we may say that a typology of different metaphorical translations and tropes could be of central importance to the study of hegemonic relations and would constitute an important contribution by the semiotics of culture to concrete empirical analyses of political phenomena.

My further academic vision would be to integrate the characteristic concepts of culture and discourse of the semiotics of culture's and the theory of hegemony's, for example, symmetry and entropy; explosion; the unsolvable tension between organization and non-organization, regularity and non-regularity; antagonism, etc., into a wider social sciences paradigm. By and large, for the social sciences these characteristics describe random and peripheral events and phenomena that

are not thought of as substantial parts of social structure. For Lotman and Laclau, however, it is precisely these characteristics that are the primary conditions for cultural development and dynamics. Transferred to social sciences, they would require reconsideration of norm and the deviation from the norm; they would also begin to undermine social determinism as a central category in social sciences. In social theoretical thought, they would better highlight political, cultural and other interest group conflicts and antagonisms that play a decisive role in the meaningful constitution of society.⁸

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Гегемоническое означивание с точки зрения семиотики культуры

В статье предпринимается попытка интегрировать теории дискурса (преимущественно теорию гегемонии Эрнесто Лакло и Эссекской школы политического дискурса в целом) с семиотикой культуры Тартуско-московской школы. Цель — показать плодотворность семиотического подхода в современном анализе политического дискурса. Оливер Маркхарт в своей книге *Postfoundational political thought: political difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* собирает под названием так наз. «постфундаментального» все подходы, которые характеризуются в основном отказом от эссенциализма и привлечением характеристик культуры и дискурса (таких как асимметрия и энтропия, взрыв, антагонизм; непреодолимое напряжение между упорядоченностью и неупорядоченностью, регулярностью и нерегулярностью и т. п.) в более широкую парадигму социальных наук. Обычно в социальных науках вышеперечисленными признаками характеризуются случайные и периферийные события и явления. По мнению автора статьи, несмотря на то, что в подобных концепциях дискурса используется понятие коммуникации, теоретическое обоснование коммуникативного характера отношений власти оставляет желать лучшего. Поскольку понятие коммуникации неразрывно связано с понятием автокоммуникации (Лотман), всегда следует рассматривать исследовательский процесс и его результат (текст), учитывая их взаимоотношения и взаимовлияние.

Hegemooniline tähistamine kultuurisemiootika perspektiivist

Käesolev artikkel püüab integreerida diskursuseteoreetilist lähenemist, ennekõike Ernesto Laclau ja Essexi koolkonna hegemooniateooriat ja Tartu-Moskva kultuurisemiootikat. Eesmärgiks on näidata semiootilise lähenemise rakendatavust kaasaegses poliitikaanalüüsis. Oliver Marchart koondab oma suurepärasest raamatus *Postfoundational political thought: political difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* post-fundamentalistliku nime alla lähenemised, mida iseloomustab peamiselt essentsialistliku aluse kõrvalheit ja kultuuri ja diskursusekarakteristikute (nagu asümmeetria ja entroopia; plahvatus; ületamatu pinge organiseerituse ja mitte-organiseerituse, regulaarsuste ja ebaregulaarsuste vahel; antagonism jne) kaasamine laiemasse sotsiaalteaduste paradigmasse. Enamasti iseloomustatakse sotsiaalteadustes äsjanimetatud tunnustega juhuslikke ja perifeerseid sündmusi ning nähtusi, mis sotsiaalsesse struktuuri olemuslikult ei kuulu. Põhjendused sellisele sattumuslikkusele leitakse filosoofiast (Marchart), psühhoanalüüsist laenatud afekti mõistest (Laclau) jne. Siinkirjutajale tundub, et vaatamata kommunikatsiooni asetamisele oma diskursuse kontseptsiooni üheks teoreetilisteks nurgakiviks, jäetakse nendes kontseptsioonides enamasti võimusuhte konstrueerimise kommunikatiivne iseloom teoreetiliselt välja arendamata. Kommunikatsiooni mõiste on olemuslikult seotud autokommunikatsiooni mõistega (Lotman). Uurimisprotsessi ja uurimistulemust tulekski vaadata nende kahe kommunikatsioonimudeli valguses, kuna uurimistulemus (tekst) kuulub ise kultuuri või suuremase diskursusesse ja esineb selle kui terviku korrastamise funktsioonis. Seetõttu tuleb uurimispraktikat ja selle tulemust alati vaadata vastastikusel mõjus. Kultuurisemiootika kommunikatsioonikäsitlus aitab kaasa selle metakeele ja objektkeele metodoloogilise aspekti teoreetilisele läbi valgustamisele.