

Conversation with Boris Gasparov about semiotics and its history

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Abstract. In this interview Boris Gasparov talks about the history of the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics and about his own works on linguistics and musicology. Particular attention is paid to the understanding of the notion of sign as it relates to semiotics and structuralism.

Boris Gasparov (1940) is Professor Emeritus of Russian and East European Studies at Columbia University's Harriman Institute. His interests include Slavic linguistics, Russian and European Romanticism, 20th-century Russian literature and culture, and music. Having worked at the University of Tartu from 1966 to 1980, he emigrated from the Soviet Union to the United States, where he first taught at the University of California, Berkeley from 1983, before joining Columbia in 1993. The interview was conducted in Russian via Zoom in June 2024, on the occasion of the Tartu Semiotics Summer School held in Viljandi and Kaariku on 28–31 August 2024 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the first summer school.²

I would first like to ask about your connection with the summer schools.

I met Juri Lotman in the spring of 1966, and that meeting was decisive in my decision to come to Tartu and work in the Russian language department. Of course, I had already read Tartu publications, and in that conversation we also discussed the problems of structuralism. I was familiar with all of Boris Uspensky's and Yuri Lekomtsev's articles but had no personal contacts.

I arrived in Tartu in August 1966.³ I did not have the opportunity to attend the summer school, perhaps because I had not even heard of it at the time. But I was

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² An Estonian translation of the interview was published in *Acta Semiotica Estica* XXI in 2024, and a Russian version appeared in *Acta Slavica Estonica* XXI (*Slavica Tartuensia* XIV) in 2025.

³ The second summer school took place on 16–26 August 1966.

well and duly informed afterwards and, of course, I actively participated in the Third Summer School in 1968.

You have two degrees, in linguistics and musicology. Yet in *Sign Systems Studies* you have mainly published articles on musicology, with only two papers being on linguistics.⁴ Why is that?

The idea of musical language and the consequences it can have for the analysis of musical works proved to be more promising. Now I have lost interest in that aspect, and music is interesting to me as a historical and cultural phenomenon. But I am completely indifferent to all structural issues related to musical language.

Has anything you wrote at that time remained relevant in contemporary musicology?

Well, that is a difficult question for me now. Of course, the general principle has remained, and that is the cardinal philosophical principle of semiotics, where things are explained through other things. Music is explained through language, or, for example, a literary work is explained through the structure of musical leitmotifs. There is also a musical aspect to language: in addition to its structural and phonological aspects, phonetics has a very important melodic aspect, which I have called the melody of spoken language. All things are explained through their attribution to others. And in this respect, my musical studies at the time were, of course, just an exercise. My musical education influenced how I began to think about language.

This is a trace of semiotic problems and our life in this semiotic sphere, in Tartu, from the time that remains with me. But actually I am not interested in the texts I wrote back then.

At the same time, you say that they influenced your scientific treatment of language. Without music, without knowledge of the language of music, there would be no other understanding of natural language.

Yes, for me, the historical significance of semiotics now lies in the fact that it strongly emphasized the principle of transferring signs from one sphere to another and perceiving things not through direct observation and an illusion that we can observe and describe a thing as it is, but by referring to another thing. And this applies to all important problems. Semiotics is a general principle of cognition. Kant had already said in his early works, before *Critique of Pure Reason*, that an

⁴ See Gasparov 1969, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1981.

object is defined only by reference to another object. We cannot define an object as such.

When I read about you on Wikipedia, it says in various languages that you are the author of the concept of linguistic existence.

I could not find a good translation into English. I have an English translation of the original Russian book, but its title is *Speech, Memory, and Meaning: Intertextuality in Everyday Language* (Gasparov 2010). For some reason, I did not dare to use the word ‘existence’.

But what semiotics did within the framework of this general, universal principle of cognition and linguistic thinking was to emphasize the arbitrariness and conventionality of signs. That a sign is a matter of agreement between those who use it. And this is a very valuable principle, because it allows us to think about so-called “scientific knowledge”, which is often based on the idea that we describe things according to very strict rules. This is precisely what semiotics has focused on, although it did not define it so radically.



Boriss Gasparov in Tartu in the 1960s.

Did you perceive a difference between structuralism and semiotics? I noticed that you used the term ‘structural-semiotic method’ in a way similar to Juri Lotman’s.

That is a very interesting question you have asked. Here, we can look at it historically, because when semiotics was first created, it depended heavily on linguistic structuralism. It seemed that linguistics had developed a description, terminology, and set of categories that were ready to work with semiotics.

Saussure’s assertion about the arbitrariness of linguistic signs became a central thesis of semiotics. A sign is conventional, it is not ontological, but arbitrary. Of course, very quickly – and Juri Mihailovich was one of the first to do so – people began to see the limitations of the structural frameworks established by linguistic structuralism, the impossibility of directly applying them to cultural processes, which are qualitatively much more complex. And so, as it seems to me, throughout the 1970s and 1980s Juri Mihailovich tried to maintain, as it were, an agreement between structural linguistics, semiotics, and structuralism: he expanded, complicated, and pluralized structural models in every possible way, but did not abandon them. He says that there are many structures, they interfere with each other, and they enter into dialogue. It is not possible consistently to describe a single cultural phenomenon within the framework of a single structure, because different interfering structural models operate within it. Then there was the idea, already in 1989, that periods of structural contractual capital accumulation were replaced by periods of explosion, and a new process began out of this chaos.

This means not abandoning the principle of structure, but expanding it, surrounding it with pluralism, showing the forces that interfere with each other, but these forces themselves are guided by the principle that they operate on behalf of a certain semiotic model, a certain semiotic contract.

Do you support this idea in your work?

To start with, I was a very young man, too young to deal with such difficult questions. It is not mathematics for you. You need experience here, you have to live, you have to read different things, think... It takes decades before you begin to understand anything. That is why I was a happy person. The little I knew could be applied very quickly and easily, using a little imagination and the ability to manipulate the mind. It was possible to get interesting results very efficiently.

But later things got more complicated. I started thinking about Saussure, who played a very important role in my life. I read *Course in General Linguistics* as a student at a provincial university, where nothing was known about structuralism in the mid-1950s. The debate on structuralism in the journal *Voprosy yazykoznaniiya* had just begun in 1956. At that time, I was in my first year at university in Rostov-

on-Don. It was a strong university with a good traditional programme, but of course there was no talk of scientific modernism there.

And for me, the USSR was the embodiment of the idea that behind all the chaos of the empirical Soviet world, behind the crude meaninglessness of its slogans, there was a structure – the silent agreements on the basis of which people act, and even if they act in violation of these agreements, the very fact of the violation confirms their silent presence in our lives. If you have agreed on it, then that is how it is. Do not look for an explanation as to why this or that object is called by this or that word.

I do not remember what year it was, sometime in the 1980s, when you came to Estonia from America and gave a lecture in Tartu. You talked about how people learn new words or expressions, that it happens in context. And you gave the example of “a sea of hands”⁵ – what do you call it when “the sea” is really in front of your eyes...

Indeed, in my work on language and memory in the 1990s, I expanded on this principle, applying it not only to words, but more generally to the idea that language consists of manipulating ready-made expressions, combining them with each other and immediately recognizing whole expressions – I called this ‘a communicative fragment’. And we have a large number of these expressions in our memory that we simply remember.

And could it not be that if the first use in a specific situation is wrong, I might remember it and use it incorrectly?

Exactly. At one time, we were all going in the same direction, that is, toward absolute arbitrariness. Now we are going in the opposite direction. If you read carefully what is said in *Course in General Linguistics*, you will not find ready-made quotations, slogans that are repeated endlessly, thousands of times: there are only differences; the speaker is told to choose, but you choose this and not that, etc. If you read carefully, slowly, the whole book, and especially if you read Saussure’s notes, which he wrote ten years before he was forced to teach this course in general linguistics at the University of Geneva. And he did not want to, because he looked at the depth of the arbitrary sign and saw that it is precisely because the sign is arbitrary that it is completely defenseless.

This means that it lacks ontological substance, that anyone can freely move and push this sign, bend it in any direction, depending on the situation in speech. And the sign has no protection. Saussure says that language, *la langue*, is a ship that has

⁵ The original Russian expression referred to a forest of hands.

been docked. But when in use, language is a ship that has been cast out to sea. He does not say this directly, but it can be understood that it is a ship with no crew, which no one controls, simply carried along by the waves in any direction.

It is precisely this arbitrariness, this defenselessness of the sign, which makes it absolutely open to all kinds of changes, that makes any consistent system fundamentally impossible. Not because there are many of them and they communicate with each other, but because there may be no system whatsoever. This is the other side of the so-called semiotic problem, which became more important to me in the second half of my life.

Don't you think that this particular problem is especially relevant right now when so much attention is paid to words and attempts are made to change reality by changing words? The situation is very semiotic right now.

Of course, of course. Well, it is just a very visual process, because the intervention of the internet, artificial intelligence, and so on, combined with the ability to create these endless convincing simulacra, has exposed this problem. The problem of the complete defenselessness of language and, in general, of all conventions. Yes, indeed, you have noticed this very well, and now this problem seems to be becoming obvious.

Artificial intelligence has exposed the problem; it does not have that memory, the context of application, it has never seen that "sea" of hands. AI exists only in the world of words.

Absolutely. If I were to rewrite my book on language and memory now, I would talk about this.

I am currently working on my next project, writing a book about Kant. The project is called "Kant and His Interlocutors". The idea is that I want to talk about Kant's philosophy not as a philosophical system, but as an intellectual conglomerate driven by dialogues. He responds to some people, writes to them, they write to him, read some of his works, write about them. Thus, this dialogical structure is constantly changing as a reactive, unpredictably changing system of views, reactions, and perspectives.

I hope I can do this; I am not sure yet if I will succeed, but I will try anyway. To test my theory of linguistic existence in practice, so to speak.

How do you feel about semiotics now? What does it mean to you?

Of course, there is a certain continuity; as you get older, the question of the unpredictability and indeterminacy of the human spiritual and cultural world becomes increasingly more prominent. Looking back at semiotics in the 1960s

and even the 1970s, I paradoxically see it as a historical phenomenon that reflected the spirit of its time. It seems that the 1960s were critical in this movement. We know what happened in France, what happened in America at that time. And there is the Soviet analogue, a kind of Tartu–Moscow analogue to this movement. It is a system that affirmed culture with a capital C and a kind of super-order that stands behind all the chaotic, empirical events that take place in life. Which exists implicitly as Kant’s imperative – one could say the imperative of semiotic order.

For me, this is a very vivid reflection of the time we lived in. Because we actually lived in a situation of complete chaos and no rules or laws whatsoever.

A student in Paris, a student at Berkeley, California, lives in a generally orderly society, which is better or worse, but which is governed by rules and laws. And he hates those laws, he exposes them, he brings them out using a semiotic model (deconstruction). He exposes their intentionality, that they work in the interests of certain social groups. At the same time, people in Moscow, Leningrad, Saratov, Yerevan are sitting in this terrible hole. And then the idea of a semiotic sphere, a cultural environment that makes it possible to live, arises. It surrounds us like a protective belt, shielding us from this terrible chaos and entropy.

This is the utopia and the idea of escape that you talked about in your article⁶...

Yes, of course. When I entered this livable human world in the 1980s, the contrast was very stark. The protective, therapeutic side of semiotic theory became clear to me as it emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

By the way, in this article, you say that an esoteric “bird slang” was used, and you give examples from different papers. I read these examples, and I could not see anything incomprehensible or esoteric. Perhaps this is because I already knew and had read these texts and was accustomed to this kind of language.

Of course, for me too, this is not just esoteric language, but a language that I spoke myself. I quote myself there as well. You are used to it, of course, you have learned it, but that is the point, and that is the task of semiotics: to discover the conventionality, the agreement in what seems self-evident to you. As well as the interests that lie behind one or another *contrat sémiotique*.

But back then it was not self-evident at all. I had the opportunity to talk to people from Moscow and Leningrad who came to Tartu on a pilgrimage. They came to see what was happening here. But they did not understand it. In linguistics, this was very visible, because at that time, structural linguistics and generative grammar had developed with advanced terminology. And highly

⁶ Gasparov 1994.

qualified linguists who had not been trained in this terminological system were unable to read these texts, could not understand them.

I think this is still the case. Now we encounter the same thing in our department; we are accused of talking about simple things in incomprehensible words, which is strange because we ourselves think that everything is clear.

I think those who accuse you are right. This means that there must be self-reflection. I myself refused to speak any such special language. It seems to me that if I cannot explain my thoughts in the simplest language to a simple person who is capable of thinking and is interested in the subject – if I cannot do that, then what I think is worthless.

Do you currently use the word ‘semiotics’ at all?

No, for me, the value of semiotics is that it is a very important episode in the history of science. Like rhetoric in its day, which was one of the main disciplines in the humanities for centuries. I remember being very surprised when I came to Berkeley to find a department of rhetoric, which was simply a remnant of the old days, but it was soon disbanded. Everyone deals with rhetoric. It goes without saying that you use a rhetorical apparatus when reading texts. But there is no point in treating rhetoric as a separate science with its own conceptual apparatus. And the same thing happens with semiotics. Its importance lies precisely in the fact that, as I have already said, it strongly emphasized the idea of the contractual nature of signs and total semiotic transfer, the transfer of signs from one intellectual sphere to another. This fact of transfer gives rise to a certain meaning. And that is a very important achievement. But attempts to describe it using some kind of special apparatus, the desire to make it a separate discipline – that seems unproductive to me at the moment.

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