

On post-colonial semiotics*

Eero Tarasti

Post-colonial analysis covers an amazingly broad field of phenomena, ranging from imperialistic to other ideologically subordinating discourses. Even Europe itself is internally divided into colonizers and colonized. Semiotically, Saussure's signifier/signified relationship must be broadened to include the one which — or who — signifies or makes something signify (*signum facere*), that is to say, the one who has the modal competence to provide something with a meaning. The signified, in turn, is that which has been provided (notice the tense!); that which has *de facto* become the signified or object of a particular exercise of semiotic power. He, she or it has had no control over what significations have been joined to it. Therefore post-colonial sign analysis is always the rebellion of the signified, or *colonialisé*, against the signifier, the *colonialisant*. For the Modernist project it was typical of signifiers — things or thing-like signs — to revolt against the signifieds which had been forced upon them. The Russian Formalists discovered that art was the sum of artistic devices; and Raymond Queneau, with his *Exercices stylistiques*, in turn showed how the message (the narrated) depended completely on the narrating elements or signifiers.

Colonializing discourse is omnipresent throughout the collective memory of history. Any message can become part of the colonializing act of signification, and it often proves futile to try to change this situation by emphasizing the inherent value of the colonized. The fault does not lie in the content of the sign, but in the ways in which another sign system grasps, frames, defines, and finally deprives it of use by the larger, "Great Society" (this term comes from Josiah Royce, American philosopher and a contemporary of Peirce). To be colonized, however, does not mean that one would have no access to the *langue* of the Great Society. Without a *langue* one cannot

* See p. 132.

communicate at all. Rather, the colonizing language, while accessible to all, at the same time abducts the *langue* into its own possession and denies others any right to it.

Post-colonial theory, as it has taken shape in the last several years as part of post-structuralist thought, contains discussions about experiences of various kinds: migration, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperialistic Europe, such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being (These are discussed in detail, in the *Post-colonial Studies Reader*; Ashcroft et al. 1995; for the above list, see p. 2). None of these characteristics is “essentially” post-colonial, but together they form the complex fabric of the field. Stephen Slem, in his contribution to the *Post-colonial Studies Reader*, “The Scramble for Post-colonialism”, defines the concept as follows:

Post-colonialism, as it is now used in its various fields, describes a remarkably heterogeneous set of subject positions, professional fields, and critical enterprises. It has been used as a way of ordering a critique of totalising forms of Western historicism; as a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of “class”, as a subset of both postmodernism and post-structuralism (and conversely, as the condition from which those two structures of cultural logic and cultural critique themselves are seen to emerge); as the name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; as a cultural marker of non-residency for a third-world intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power; as an oppositional form of “reading practice”, and — and this was my first encounter with the term — as the name for a category of “literary” activity which sprang from a new and welcome political energy going on within what used to be called “Commonwealth literary studies” (in Ashcroft et al. 1995: 45)

Post-colonial theory has emerged in societies under the sway of European imperial power, although it has not always appeared in the form of theoretical texts. As a rule, the term has been used to indicate the process of imperialist suppression in the institutions and discursive practices of all the relevant societies. Moreover, no community is so small and subordinated that it would not, in its turn, become the colonizer (for examples, consider the Finnish in the Baltic countries and Carelia, and the Estonians towards the *inkeriläiset* and *setukaiset*).

One colonizing technique is that of silencing. Pre-colonial practices are suppressed simply by the fact that one no longer talks

about them. The colonized subject keeps silent, since that is his only possibility for transcendence: the colonizing discursive practice has taken the voice into its possession. The “natives” either fall silent and talk about “tacit knowledge”, or they attempt to turn weakness into a virtue.¹ The truth of the matter is that a discursive space has to be taken in the same way as physical space (Le Corbusier once said that the first cultural act of man is to take space into his possession). One result discursive practices that have a silencing or muting effect can be seen in international public discussions. There, the representative of a peripheral, colonized country is not supposed to take strongly held, principled positions; the voice of such a representative must not speak too loudly. Instead, such voices are occasionally permitted to speak on a symbolic level, as representatives of the domain of “art”, where their exotic qualities can be admired (many years ago Lévi-Strauss spoke about this role of “art” as the “savage mind” of our time).

The position of a colonized object cannot be improved by its being shifted to the status of a colonizing object, that is to say, by subordinating others to it or by trying to emphasize the excellence of its inner qualities. The only real solution would be the dissolution of the relationship of signifying — that of subordinating/subordinated, or dominant/dominated — which in most cases is an impossible venture. In fact, every semiotic act — at the same moment one identifies, delimits and fixes the relationship of signifier/signified — such an act includes within itself the relationship of dominant/dominated. Knowing this helps us to peer into the hidden power mechanisms of those non-verbal discourses that represent so-called “tacit” knowledge. (A cautionary word: The dominant/dominated distinction should not be identified with gender dichotomies, although in certain phases of Western history it does coincide with them, such that masculine = dominant, and feminine = dominated).

Here is the essential problem in the post-colonial situation of the “colonized” nations of Europe — and this concerns all peripheries, i.e., the so-called “nationalistic” cultures, since the dominant cultures usually do not represent themselves in the colonizing discourse as national but as universal types; and sometimes the problem is pushed into the background by the use of other dichotomies such as German/Latin (as Adolphe Appia has done): How can we distinguish, within the European cultural heritage, its colonizing elements from its

¹ See the recent studies in Finland about the semiotics of silence, by Pirjo Kukkonen (1993) and Hannele Koivunen.

real *langue*, which even the “natives”, we as Europeans, have the right to speak? For we naturally do not want to adopt the values of colonizing discourse when expressing our innermost experiences. The answer is, One has to leave space around every subject and society, a space which transcends words, gestures, signs and objects. That space must be, first of all, empty; it is not the same as the semiosphere, which is already filled with signs and signifying units. Therefore, liberation from the sign relations of dominant/dominated starts as early as with the creation of an empty space, in which signs can be detached from their earlier, fixed signifying relations. Consequently, the first semiotic act is not that of signifying. Rather, it is an event that has already taken place before the subject grasps the sign. A semiotic act is the negation of the signified, an abandonment the ready-made meaning. Thus, it is also an existential moment, it is choice, it is a breaking free from the power of the signified and the creation of a new (transcendental) space. Post-colonial theory is therefore intimately related to existential semiotics, which always emphasizes the situation of an individual and his abilities to influence the signifying process. A subject can change his or her own position as a subject, define him-/herself, and so escape the power of dominant signs.

In this connection, it is worth noticing the hidden anti-existential nature of many postmodern theories, a kind of pessimism, which could be called our *mal de siècle*, a sense of hopelessness. George Henrik von Wright once described this situation as the “dictatorship of conditions”. Moreover, postmodern society is qualified by too much everything: a surfeit of communication, knowledge, words, or in the words of Baudrillard, an “ecstasy of communication”. Vattimo, in turn, argues that we can no longer speak about reality and truth, but only of their imitations, their *simulacra*. It has been further said that semiotics cannot represent a so-called “first philosophy”, because of its inability to deal with ontological and metaphysical questions. Yet existential semiotics is precisely first-philosophy. The real problem is that the world of *communication* has attained such an exaggerated position that one has forgotten the other side of the semiotic project, that of *signification*, from which entirely new theoretical avenues are opened. The world of communication can be colonized, but there are always ruptures, from which the voice of the subordinated subaltern breaks through. This voice must be encouraged to speak. For only in such a way can it understand how its *Dasein* opens into transcendence and how it is capable of comprehending transcendent ideas, the

categories that throw light on communication in such a way that the semiosis appears in a completely new critical aspect. In this way, post-colonial theory is also existential semiotics.

It is also argued that we live in a world of interpretations and interpreting. We do not speak about matters of truth directly, but dwell upon what has been said about them. (Greimas said this decades ago, when he stated that there is no *vérité* but only *véridiction*.) Thus the present media world is a kind of reified nominalism. It runs contrary to the ideas of existential semiotics, which go deeper into the moment before the formation and fixation of discourse, before the act of signifying — which always includes a certain exertion of power.

Always when we signify or provide something with significance, we create a sign which serves as a tool of power. This is particularly the case if this signification becomes a type or legisign to some token sign occurrence. The Venezuelan writer José Manuel Brincedo de Guerreiro, in his essay “L’enfance d’un magicien”, depicts how one goes beyond words and dissolves the act of signifying.² In the same way, the creation of the social sphere (semiosphere) is portrayed in the novel *Friday*: when it does not exist, it must be invented by a solitary man on a deserted island. Yet the lack which Robinson soon notices is that the signs he creates do not have any “Other”; they do not have the subordinated or dominated content before the man Friday appears. The author, Tournier, shows how Western society is quintessentially based upon a colonial experience. At the end of the story, there remains a kind of Other of Other: the Estonian boy who stays on the island after Friday has left, and becomes emancipated.³

The post-modern situation may be put into the following dichotomies, which indicate the shifts from one category to another:

- we have moved from representation to production (this means almost the same as the above comment on the difference between the semiotics of signification and that of communication);
- from realism to a reified nominalism (we cannot reach the truth but only simulacra, not Plato’s ideas, just shadows in a cave);
- from an authentic message to a media message;

² I am indebted to Drina Hocevar for bringing this interesting author to my attention.

³ For many of these ideas, I am thankful to the attendants of my seminar on semiotics at the University of Helsinki during the school term of 1997–98. Among others attending were Kristian Bankov, Drina Hocevar, Luiz Fernando de Lima, and Mikko Kuusimäki.

- from the optimism of a unique experience to the pessimism of repeated mechanical experiences;
- from one whole subject to many fragmentary subjects, which appear without any unifying factor;
- from explicit colonialism, in which the dominant/dominated aspect is determined conspicuously and unequivocally, to implicit colonialism (often called post-colonialism) — a state in which the relationship dominant/dominated still prevails, but masked as the less noticeable power of the media.

In the emancipation of a subject, it is of course essential which of the following alternatives he/she chooses: 1) hybrid communication, whereby he tries to change the colonial signifying process from within: the subject assumes the dominant *langue* by which to express his/her own Otherness; 2) or going outside the whole relationship of dominant/dominated by establishing one's own *langue* and producing one's own *parole* within it. The latter case brings with it the danger that the subject will exaggerate his/her own *langue*, i.e., will elevate it, in turn, to a colonializing status (for instance, a text created on the "periphery" is raised to the level of having a national-patriotic originality).

How do nationalism and patriotism related to this situation? In the first phase, the colonial state, they are positive forces. But in the second phase, or postcolonial state, aggressive and marked nationalism becomes negative, since by defining itself as national a state, at the same moment, establishes itself as the external "Third world" and not the authentic "First world". The whole process can be taken as the background for the formation of icons and idols.⁴

According to Abdul R. JanMohamed, colonial literature scrutinizes and represents the world at the borderlines of civilisation, the world which European signification has not yet tamed or encoded in a detailed way with its own ideology. This world is conceived as uncontrolled, chaotic, unreachable and basically evil. In his will to occupy and rule, the imperialist conceives the colonial reality as an opposition, which is based upon differences among race, language, social habits, cultural values and ways of production.

Faced with an incomprehensible and multifaceted alterity, the European theoretically has the option of responding to the Other in terms of identity

⁴ I have discussed the formation of icons and symbols elsewhere; see Tarasti, *The Enchanted Signs* (forthcoming).

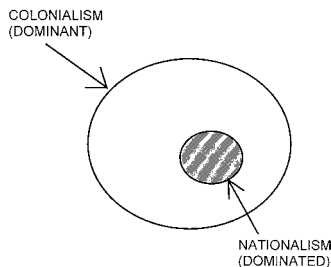
or difference. If he assumes that he and the Other are essentially identical, then he would tend to ignore the significant divergences and to judge the Other according to his own cultural values. If, on the other hand, he assumes that the Other is irremediably different, then he would have little incentive to adopt the viewpoint of that alterity: he would again tend to turn to the security of his own cultural perspective. Genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture (JanMohamed, in Ashcroft et al. 1995: 18).

JanMohamed further argues that “if every desire is at base a desire to impose oneself on another and to be recognized by the Other, then the colonial situation provides an ideal context for the fulfillment of that fundamental drive” (ibid: 20). On this view, we could say that post-colonial theory is connected to many other post-structuralist doctrines of psychoanalysis, gender theory, the Kristevan definition of the subject, and the like.

According to another writer in the anthology, Homi K. Bhabha, colonialism does not simply refer to a “person”, to a power struggle between self and the Other, or to a distinction between a mother culture and alien cultures. The trace of a disapproved culture is not repressed but repeated as something different, as a mutation, a hybrid (the Derridean *différance*, which indicates both “differing” and “deferring”, applies to this situation). This view parallels those of the cultural semiotic school around Yuri Lotman, whose scholars speak about the integration of such completely “different” elements (representing the non-culture) into the culture in the proper sense: those elements must remain “exotic” in order to fulfill the function of non-cultural counter-force, by which the culture properly speaking can measure or be seen to constitute its own sameness.

Colonial praxis is therefore not only an unambiguous repression, but a subtle, mixed, and ambivalent discursive practice. What is involved in colonialism — and its flipside, nationalism — is often precisely the subjectivity, suppression of an individual and his/her emancipation. Among other questions, one might ask, What is that suppressive element in the colonized cultures, which quite often makes the careers of their artists, politicians, and intellectuals finish prematurely? It is the colonialisng, subordinating discursive practice, the invisibly masked Power as the Other, which exhausts the resources of those whose energy is consumed in their endless fight against it.

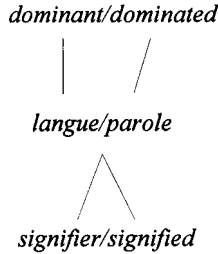
Nationalism can be seen as the flipside of colonialism. To the latter it is a counteraction, a resistance phenomenon to the dominant, colonialising culture according to the following scheme, which puts nationalism in the place of the dominated phenomenon:



One must further ask, What kinds of signs, in this broader dichotomy, occupy the place of dominated. That is to say, what kind of sign practices can this relationship absorb into its usage. The case is somewhat analogous to Roland Barthes's model of the mythical sign system, in which the signified of the original sign is pushed aside, and is replaced by the new signified of bourgeois ideology. In this case, the relation dominant/dominated does not influence the contents of the relation signifier/signified: the sign remains as sign, but instead has an impact on the relation indicated by the slash (/) between signifier and signified. Those signs in which this relationship has solidified into something more stable are susceptible to getting into this subordinate position, the more fixed the relationship is. In the extreme case this appears as marked stereotype signs, which have been elevated to the position of an icon or even idol. They do not permit any kind of space to move to the signified. If this relationship is already sedimented in the sign, the subordination is easily realized. In those signs, in turn, in which it has not yet been crystallized, the falling to the right-most position in the scheme dominant/dominated puts the signs in their subordinate position.

The dominant/dominated relation also concerns the relationship of *langue/parole*. Very often the subordinated voices can speak — have their voices heard — only after they have adopted the *langue* of the dominant culture. *Langue* is, however, always a collective contract, which the dominant society has signed for the dominated before it can even think about it. In Heideggerian terms, the dominated is always

“thrown” into its lower position. The revolt of the dominated signs takes place as the detachment of the signified from its signifier, as its opening to redefinitions. Yet it can also occur as a rebellion of the signifier, as a new physical quality, appearing as subversive to the dominant, who forces itself into a reevaluation. Therefore, we face a chain of three sign relations:



In the first instance, a dominated voice can make itself heard by dissolving the signifier/signified relation within the conveyed *parole*. For example, in the music of Jean Sibelius there appears a new aesthetic quality which is distinct from “European rationality”, a quality which one could only call the voice of Nature. Even a quite newly published Sibelius study, by an Englishman Guy Richards, launches with this statement: “More than any other single factor, the music of Jean Sibelius is quintessentially the product of the natural landscapes (physical, ethnic, historical and political) of his native country”. A more typically colonializing statement one could hardly find. In it, Sibelius is articulated strictly as a peculiarity to be found in a certain place. Thus one cannot apply to him those normal categories of the rationality of Western art music, by which we evaluate the so-called universal composers such as Beethoven, Brahms, Mahler, and the like. The phrase is also racist — with its reference to physical ethnicity — and chauvinist, by stating that Sibelius manifests the history and politics of a certain, particularly peripheral nation: in a word, the composer is situated as part of the colonial discourse. The only thing missing here is the gender definition. But even this found, among other places, in Charles Ives’s statement about the effeminate quality of Sibelius’s music.

One must remember that categories of dominant/dominated are not only an umbrella concept for subordinated sign processes, but they represent the positions of two different subjects. The dominant one is the colonizing subject, who sees all sign processes from its own point

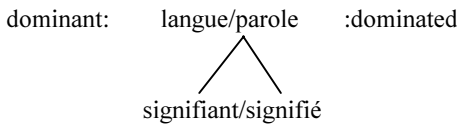
of view. The dominated position, in turn, is occupied by the subordinated subject, who either accepts the situation without question, or who itself wants to occupy the dominant position. It may strive to gain this status by fulfilling all the requirements of the colonizing discourse as “by the book” or as thoroughly as possible, or by transgressing them — in which case it wants to revolt. This rebellion or resistance is possible on levels mentioned earlier. For one, the signifiers can refuse to carry the signifieds thrust upon them from above. This is a kind of subversion of Firstness, an outbreak of qualities and phenomena by their own weight, their detachment from the heaviness of the signifieds forced upon them, and riddance of the *langue* guiding them. For instance, certain gestures may no longer sublimate into a “spiritualized expression” within the limits of the prevailing aesthetics, such that sound colours do not find enough place within conventional musical frameworks, or rhythms and melodies may abandon traditionally accepted codes (for instance, those of periodicity and quadratic phrasing). Also, in the background an entirely new signified may arise. If there occurs the emancipation from the gendering sign relationships, then the whole unlimited field of khora, body, desire and inclination rises up in the foreground.

Resistance can also appear if the *parole* as a whole is so penetrated by new signifiers and signifieds that it becomes an idiolect, a new species of speech, which cannot be decoded with the rules of the dominant *langue*. This shuts the dominated into a tragic and devastating loneliness, unless he or she can find for this new speech a community, even the smallest, in which it would be accepted and understood. Thus the rebellion of the *parole* and its success depends on the social semiotic conditions, in the form of the response which the dominated, rebellious subject can receive from other individuals in the same position.

Yet another possibility for revolt would be to grasp directly the *langue* that is determined by the dominant and thus properly sanctioned. This — to become oneself a reformer of language — is the most difficult task. It is much easier to adopt the *langue* of a new content or *parole*, with its own fresh signifiers and signifieds. This is the only way an artist born in the periphery can become accepted by the dominant colonialising society. The fact of being approved also implicitly justifies the dominant *langue*, its extraordinariness and exquisiteness and stability: “Look, he came from such a remote country, without no civilized traditions and institutions. But in spite of

this he rose to the top of our art.” So long as he keeps within the boundaries of the *langue*, such an artist is willingly permitted to convey his “picturesque” ethnic and racial features. For the dominant culture, this only shows forth its tolerance and all-encompassing nature — its ability to accommodate the most varied cultures within itself.

From the dominated subject’s point of view, this often manifests the attitude of “he showed the world, he ran, played, painted, drew us a the map”. But then one does not ask what or who that world is, to whom something is shown. One does not realize that it is the colonializing, dominant world in which the signs are stationed at those places where the dominant had once put them. Therefore our scheme should be corrected to the following form:



Stephen Slemon equates post-colonial discourse and postmodernism, and quite rightly, since the postmodern thesis that “everything has been said” is only a variant of colonialism’s view that nothing new can exist outside of the dominant culture, beyond the prevailing systems of communication. No new meaning can emerge from the process of signification. There is no freshness of Firstness for postmodern man.

In the postmodern era everyone is (or experiences themselves as being) dominated, but the dominant is nameless. Sign relations have been established by some agent prior to the dominated subjects. This agent is not a precise media figure or spokesperson, nor all of them together; it is not one of the pundits or opinion builders, from Bernard Pivot to Larry King, but rather their “ideal type” (in Max Weber’s sense). The meanings of media and communication are already fixed and ready; the much touted freedom of choice in programming is a ridiculous fiction. Modern media technology has colonized the entire globe. All are dominated, and forced to look at the stream of communication from this position. Therefore post-colonial theory extends to the whole sociosemiotic situation of contemporary man. The only exit is the semiotics of the resistance and de-subordination, as discussed above. Clearly one can see how the various aforementioned solutions are already being used by different groups: 1) those who wish to

reform the *langue* of communication (are semioticians among them?); 2) those who want to provide communication with either a new content or new *parole* (“dissidents”, “village idiots”, and other “odd-balls”, whose thoughts are met with amusement, since by allowing their speech, the dominant power justifies the functioning of the system and its “democracy”); 3) those who want to explode the relationship of signifier/signified, either by believing in the power of new “qualities” — certain kinds of avant-garde art, displaying “roadkill” (animal carcasses struck by cars) as art, shock effects in the movies, experiments with new musical timbres, new culinary signs, and so on — or by putting faith in the force of new signifieds; for example, in new ethical and religious movements.

Moreover, the absolute majority is formed by the dominated, who want to distinguish themselves at meeting the conditions of the dominants and by doing so attain the latter’s status. One sees this in the case of the news photographer who went to Sarajevo and Tshetsshenia with the sole intent of obtaining a Pulitzer prize. He did not stop to question the dominant media ploy, in post-colonial countries, of producing a certain amount of catastrophes so as to titillate the dominated receivers (television watchers, readers, listeners, etc.) so that they do not become bored (this is the interpretation of Jean Baudrillard). Sports and musical competitions also exemplify ways in which dominant cultures try to legitimize themselves.

If one thinks of the dominant and dominated as juxtaposed subject positions, they could be easily identified with sender and receiver. For a seed of subordination is latent in any communication, nurtured by the fact that the sender forces the receiver to “read” his/her message. And yet the situation is not so one-sided. That is to say, the dominant could be the receiver and the dominated the sender. If I say, “Your Excellency is so kind; do allow me to add cream to your coffee”, then I am a sender who, by the content of the message, tries to show that he considers the receiver to be of a higher status than himself. A semiotic act as such does not contain the articulation of power into signifier and signified, but can also include it. As a semiotic act one may take that activity whereby something immanent is made manifest. I have an idea in my mind, and I realize it through my act. Is, then, any act whatsoever a semiotic act? No, since according to the term itself, an act has to be significant — it has to create, destroy, promote, prohibit, preserve, frame, elevate, reward, punish, glorify something meaningful. In other words, it has to be related with a meaning. (On the other

hand, signification can be also of a completely inner nature. But rather than engage that issue now, I shall consider it below, with a theory of the semiotic act.)

The idea of the dominant and dominated can be generalized to cover one basic situation in existential semiotics, in which a subject treats another subject as an object. This always involves the reification of the Other in the terms of the dominant. Thus we have here an essential application of existential semiotics to the social field. By contrast, the Bakhtinian concept is that in a dialogue the sender is not necessarily the dominant and the receiver the dominated, but both subjects construct themselves freely during the communication process. The meaning effects (Greimas's *effets de sens*) which emerge during this process result from the transcendental values of both subjects. Someone might argue that no transcendental values are needed for the creation of significations. The social significations are those which simply are yielded in this process and nothing else; they only have validity in this dialogue, not outside of it. One might even take this as a particularly existential semiotic standpoint, viewing the resultant significations as completely immanent and unattached to any preexisting categories. Yet this is not true, since the criteria for social significations are not their functionality, efficiency and fruitfulness in social communication, but that the partners of the dialogue both compare them to their own transcendental categories and their own positions between the two transcendences of nothingness and plenitude (both as a distance and proximity, as well as the inevitable changes of the corporeal life between life and death in the bio- and psychosemiotic process; on the axis of inchoativity, durativity and terminativity, to use Greimassian terms). In a certain sense such a comparison is also a semiotic act which establishes a relationship to the encyclopedic store, as Umberto Eco puts it.

What is essential in the emancipation of the subject is naturally which alternative he or she chooses: 1) hybrid communication — the attempt to change the colonial signification process from within by adopting the subordinating *langue* in order to express his/her own Otherness in its context; or 2) communication which transgresses the whole relationship of dominant/dominated by creating its own *langue* and by producing its own *parole* in this framework. In the latter case there is the danger that the subject exaggerates his own *langue*, i.e., elevates it in turn to the colonizing position.

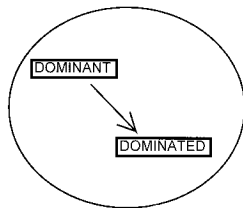
We can try to define nationalism and patriotism from this viewpoint. They are positive forces in the colonial state (phase 1), but in phase 2 (the post-colonial state) the aggressive, marked nationalism is transmuted into the negative, since by defining itself as national it at the same time also consigns itself to an external “Third” world and not an authentic First world. This whole process can be also seen as the background process of building so-called national “icons” and idols.

How then should the dominant and the dominated encounter each other, such that communication and signification would fulfill the emancipatory function which is immanent in existential semiotics? Must the dominant continually make the dominated aware of the hierarchical difference between them (as in some universities where the professor prohibits the students to address him in familiar terms, in order to make plain their subordinate status)? Or should the dominant conceal or mask the difference as carefully as possible, although both parties remain aware that it still exists? How should the dominated behave; in what manner should he/she approach the dominant?

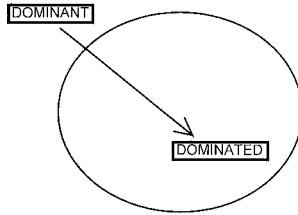
He may try to identify with it, despite the fact that *Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi*. Or he may try to position himself in clear rejection and resistance, perhaps by foregrounding those signifiers which he/she knows will irritate the dominant as something alien to its sameness (*épater le bourgeois*). Or one can absolutely refuse to communicate, and withdraw into one’s own world — which does not of course abolish the colonialist relationship as such.

The communication between the dominant and the dominated is also influenced by their position in the *Dasein*. If they inhabit the same *Dasein*, in the society or community, they cannot avoid interaction and encounters are unavoidable. If they live in different *Daseins*, as in different “worlds”, they may encounter each other only on the discursive level. This may be illustrated by the following diagrams:

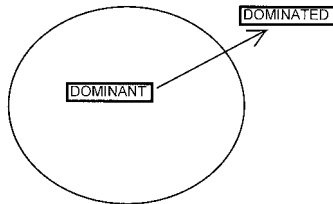
1) dominant and dominated occupy the same *Dasein*:



2) the dominant is outside of the *Dasein* of the dominated (where the emphasis lies on the *Dasein* of the dominated):



3) the dominated is outside of the *Dasein* of the dominant (where the main stress lies upon the *Dasein* of the dominant):



Construed as a theoretical problem, the semiotic act, as such, consists of two aspects: rendering something manifest and making a decision immanently, within one's mind, such that this solution is the origin of a change. These differences could also be connected to other categories, namely to the distinction between communication and signification. An act can be a communicative act; it can be addressed to another subject or to the destinator of the communication, it can be an act solely creating significations, and not directed towards communication, i.e., the world of various subjects acting in the *Dasein*. A semiotic act thus takes shape differently in various discursive practices and semiospheres. In aesthetic discourse, when a semiotic act is addressed to another subject, a message is produced which is an artwork addressed to a certain community as partners in a dialogue. But when merely experiencing the aesthetic meaning is involved, then we limit ourselves to the area of aesthetics, such that the parallels are as follows: aesthetics = signification, art = communication.

As to ethics, when we do something moral to another subject, for instance an act of goodness, we are dwelling in the world of ethical communication. But when we only get a moral idea, conceive the

moral content of some event or phenomenon, then we are trying to grasp its moral and ethical meaning or signification; as seen, for instance, in notions such as solidarity, compassion, reverence, and so on.⁵ The objective of an ethical act of communication can naturally be some reward allotted to the community of communication, some benefit or pleasure, but in the last instance the only content of such an act lies in itself, i.e., in the transcendental category which opens via one's grasping the signification of the moral act. Moral acts are thus realized in the world threatened by nothingness. Their background of resonance is emptiness, which recognizes neither good nor evil. Still, one can perform a moral act as its own reward (in fact, in the world of *Dasein* a moral act just as often brings disadvantage to the actor and thus does not lead to any conspicuous glorification).

In the religious dimension, the semiotic act can be realized in communication as a cult or prayer. But in signification it appears as the "illumination" of the world in relationship to what is called "pleroma". In that case the objective of such an act is the experience of a particular grace attained by realizing the plenitude of being; i.e. experiencing that one has not been thrown into the emptiness of being, but that being is carried on by a plenitude greater than oneself.

In the economic realm, the semiotic act can be realized in communication as an exchange of things, and in the sense of signification it is the experience of its value, the compensation for work performed. In the linguistic area the act of communication is naturally the production of discourse via *langue*. Signification here means that the intention of the speaker is enacted in the form of its particular meaning effect.

In all these cases, the issue is to what extent the world of communication or *Dasein* penetrates to the world of signification, and to what extent the act of signification can again change the world of communication. The concept of act always carries the idea of a certain energy invested in the act by the actor. Two questions to be addressed come to mind immediately: How is this determined in the various cases above, and how does it influence the situation? (It is likely that the theories of Italian semioticians Ferruccio Rossi-Landi and Augusto Ponzio can offer us help in this field.)

In any case, according to Aijaz Ahmad, such a theoretician of the postmodern as Fredric Jameson divides the world into those who make history and those who are its objects. Ahmad argues that anyone

⁵ See the categories of Josiah Royce and Wladimir Solowjew.

who believes in the theory of three worlds (not in the Popperian sense) — where the Third World has been defined purely with the terms of colonialism and imperialism — has to admit that one of the strongest counterforces to it is nationalism. With only a slight exaggeration one could claim that every text of the Third World is inevitably a national allegory.

Yet even more interesting is the contrary thesis: are all the manifest national texts logically “Third World” texts? For instance, nationalism in Finland necessarily relates it to colonialism, and determines the position of Finland as one of being colonized, dominated, subaltern, and then leads to a result completely different from what was desired. The more national celebrations, the more patriotism is underlined; the such (auto)communication purports to strengthen the inner feeling of coherence of the dominated society. Seen from outside, from the position of the dominant, it is a clear-cut sign that the dominated nation is in its proper place in the colonial hierarchy of nations, as an inferior, subordinated people, which is not capable of a really “universal” act of communication in the semiotic sense. As a rule, nationalist activity and emphasis are of course communication that conveys to somebody outside (to the dominant or the aspiring dominant) that what it is planning — the other’s subordination — will be useless: it is strong enough to withstand such a threat. Nationalism thus is a rejoinder to the sense of being threatened.

To conclude we may ask, In what historical phase do the texts produced in a colonized country become Third World texts? Naturally it is only the reading of these texts which makes them such. But it is also a function of space. Are texts that are classified according to their geographical place and origin already Third World texts? Consider the texts produced in Finland, the Baltic countries, Russia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Bulgaria, Portugal or Greece — are all these to be considered “Third World” texts? as having something “national” in their relation to the central axis in Europe, which represents the universal culture and only to which the categories of European rationality are applied? Sometimes such an argument can be masked in beneficent tones, as may occur when one praises a country and its people, applauds how faithfully its artists and poets reflect its nature, and the like. But it is precisely by this technique that excludes text from the “universal” community, from what Goethe called the *edle Geisterschaft*, the noble society.

Note

* This essay is part of a larger text in which I mostly focus on European nationalism and on Finland particularly, with special emphasis on Jean Sibelius as a cult figure in the North as well as elsewhere. The whole text stems from the idea that many phenomena of contemporary European cultures, like Finland, are understood only if one takes into account a remarkably broader context.

That broader aspect is simply colonialism — and post-colonialism as its continuation. The latter typically belongs to the conceptual arsenal of the 1990s, along with deconstruction, postmodernism, gender studies, etc. Post-colonialism is a notion particularly associated with English literary studies. To music it has not yet often been applied. I had encountered similar ideas earlier, when studying Brazilian culture, and found in one treatise dealing with Latin American literature, the term “colonialized imagination”. It meant that Third-World people do not know how to appreciate their own achievements, their own leaders and “icons”, but believe only in the pertinence of the values and models imported from outside, from Europe. As early as that time, it dawned upon me that the term also aptly portrayed certain phenomena in Finland, particularly the Finns’ sense of inferiority and their worship of everything foreign. But only now have I realized that the colonial heritage concerns as well and expressly my own country. The theme is now more topical than ever, since Europe can be divided into colonizers and colonized. There is no doubt in which category a country like Finland belongs.

Thus, post-colonialism is the right term to depict not only such cases as Finland, but also Estonia. In Estonia, the years 1944–1990 saw not so much the sovietisation of the society as its colonisation. The Finns believe that colonialism does not concern us, at least after 1917. In fact, however, it has concerned and still concerns us. Patriotism is a reaction to colonialist ideology, which is distinctive, racist and essentialist.

Nevertheless, when the physical threat of colonialist suppression has been removed, there remains the imagined post-colonial threat. The anti-subject is imagined since patriotism must always have it. Nationalism in all its forms is an ideology of distinction, which determines itself as a subject, i.e. the people in relation to something not-subject or anti-subject. The situation is very much similar in other European countries as well. Nothing threatens them physically, thus one has to ask, Where does this zeal of national distinction originate? From inner uncertainty. Patriotism, which serves to replace the lack of inner certainty, is as dangerous as colonialist-expansionist patriotism, i.e., the intruding of one’s own culture into others. In Finnish neopatriotism, nationalism is not expanded to anywhere; it is communication which fulfills the function of pure autocommunication.

References

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds.) (1997). *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Barthes, Roland (1957). *Mythologies*. Paris: Editions Seuil.
- Eco, Umberto (1975). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Eco, Umberto (1992). *Les limites de l'interprétation*. Paris: Bernard Grasset.
- Fisch, Max H. (1986). *Peirce, Semeiotic, and Pragmatism* (Essays by Max. H. Fisch, edited by Kenneth Laine Ketner and Christian J. W. Kloesel). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kukkonen, Pirjo (1993). *Kielen silkki. Hiljaisuus ja rakkaus kielen ja kirjallisuuden kuvastimessa*. Helsinki: Yliopistopaino.
- Royce, Josiah (1951). *Royce's Logical Essays*. Iowa: Dubuque.
- Solowjew, Wladimir (1965). *Philosophie, Theologie, Mystik. Deutsche gesamttausgabe der Werk von W. S.* Vol. VI. Freiburg: Erich Wewel Verlag.
- Tarasti, Eero (1995). *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Tarasti, Eero (1996). *Heitor Villa-Lobos. Life and Works*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland Publishers.
- Tarasti, Eero (forthcoming). *The Enchanted Signs*. Advances in Semiotics. Indianapolis, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Vattimo, Gianni (1985). *La fine della modernità. Nichilismo ed ermeneutica nella cultura post-moderna*. Milano: Garzanti.

О постколониальной семиотике

В основе проблематики работы лежит типологическое распространение сосюрговской дихотомии означаемое/означающее на соотношение социо-идеологических понятий колонизируемого/колонизатора. Таким образом, в семиотической терминологии последняя оппозиция интерпретируется как отношения тех, кто имеет право на означение, и тех, кто подлежит означению. Соответственно, ситуация пост-колониализма (например, в идеологии модернизма) описывается как настойчивые претензии означаемого означать. В качестве одной из наиболее важных стратегий колонизирующей тенденции называется стратегия 'умалчивания' или 'замалчивания'. Идеологические характеристики при этом взаимобразно распространяются на лингвистические понятия, и сфера означающего характеризуется

как доминирующая, а сфера означаемого как подчиненная. Равным образом описывается соотношение языка и речи.

С этих позиций строится модель семиотического акта, в процессе которого происходит отмена сущностного пред-значения означаемого (или отмена потенциальности его значения). В этом смысле позиции автора по вопросу о постколониальных стратегиях преодоления колониализма в сфере означения (ряд этих стратегий подробно рассматривается в статье) смыкаются с положениями экзистенциальной семиотики.

Ситуация постмодернизма (эквивалентная ситуации постколониализма) описывается как ситуация глобального семиотического подчинения (т.е. принадлежности к сфере означаемого). Подробно анализируются практики преодоления этой семиотической подчиненности.

В заключении семиотический акт рассматривается с точки зрения его двусторонней природы: коммуникативной и собственно сигнификационной. Преобладание той или иной функции прослеживается в различных сферах культуры: искусство, эстетика, этика, религия, экономика.

Postkoloniaalsest semiootikast

Artikli problemaatika aluseks on Saussure'i tähistatava/tähistaja dihhotoomia tüpoloogiline laienemine sotsio-ideoloogilistele mõistetele koloniseeritav/koloniseerija. Semiootilises terminoloogias on viimane opositsioon interpreteeritav kui suhe nende vahel, kes omab õigust tähistamisele ja kes kuulub tähistamisele. Vastavalt sellele võib postkolonialistlik situatsioon (näiteks, modernismi ideoloogias) olla kirjeldatud kui tähistaja järjekindel pretensioon tähistada.

Koloniseerimise tähtsaima põhistrateegiana on nimetatud 'maha-vaikimine'. Ideoloogilised iseloomustused levivad samas lingvistilistele mõistetele, tähistaja sfäär saab domineerivaks tähistatava kui allutatu üle. Samaselt on kirjeldatav keele ja kõne suhe.

Eeltoodud positsioonidelt on ehitatud semiootilise akti mudel, mis kirjeldab tähistatava olemusliku eel-tähenduse või potentsiaalse tähenduse likvideerimist.

Autori positsioon kolonialismi ületamise strateegiate suhtes tähistamise sfääris (rida selliseid strateegiaid on artiklis üksikasjalikult käsitletud) haakuvad eksistentsiaalse semiootika seisukohtadega.

Postmodernismi situatsioon (autori hinnangul ekvivalentne postkolonialismile) on kirjeldatud kui globaalne semiootilise allumise situatsioon (kui tähistatava sfäär). Artiklis on põhjalikult analüüsitud nimetatud semiootilise allumise ületamise praktikaid.

Töö lõpus vaadeldakse semiootilist akti tema kahepoolsest — kommunikatiivsest ja puhtmärgistavast — olemusest lähtuvalt. Erinevates kultuurisfäärides: kunstis, esteetikas, eetikas, religioonis, majanduses domineerib üks neist kahest funktsioonist.