

## Challenging identity: Lotman's "translation of the untranslatable" and Derrida's *différance*

Daniele Monticelli

Department of Romance Studies, Tallinn University  
Narva mnt 29, Tallinn 10120, Estonia  
e-mail: daniele.monticelli@tlu.ee

**Abstract.** The concept of "cultural identity" has gradually replaced such discredited concepts as "race", "ethnicity", even "nationality" in the conservative political discourse of recent decades which conceives, represents and performs culture as a closed system with clear-cut boundaries which must be defended from contamination.

The article employs the theories of Derrida and Lotman as useful tools for deconstructing this understanding of cultural identity, which has recently become an ideological justification for socio-political conflicts. In fact, their theories spring from a thorough critique of the kind of internalizing self-enclosure which allowed Saussure to delimit and describe *langue* as the object of linguistics. The article identifies and compares the elements of this critique, focusing on Derrida's and Lotman's concepts of "mirror structure", "binarism", "numerousness", "textuality" and "semiosphere".

An understanding of mediation emerges which is not reducible to any kind of definitive acquisition, thereby frustrating the pretences of identity, constantly dislocating and deferring any attempt at semiotic self-enclosure. My comparison suggests that Lotman's "translation of the untranslatable" (or "dialogue") and Derrida's *différance* can be considered analogous descriptions of this problematic kind of mediation. The (de)constructive nature of culture, as described by Lotman and Derrida, challenges any attempt to view cultural formations as sources of rigid and irreducible identities or differences.

This article represents the first systematic attempt to compare Juri Lotman's (later) thinking with Jacques Derrida's theory of *différance*. The risks associated with this undertaking become apparent when one considers that the two thinkers never (as far as I can tell) referred to each other or were even acquainted with each other's work. In other words, their texts offer neither explicit guidelines nor subtle hints to assist in the development of a

comparative analysis. This is probably why it is unlikely to encounter the name of Derrida in the field of “Lotman studies” or the name of Lotman in the field of “Derrida studies”.

In the literature on Lotman’s later theory of the semiosphere, references to the analogy (explicitly emphasized by Lotman himself) with Vernadsky’s theory of the biosphere, Prigogine’s description of biological processes (see, for instance, Mandelker 1994, Sánchez 1999, Aleksandrov 2000) and Bakhtin’s thought (see Shukman 1989, Reid 1990) have recently been integrated with comparisons with Peirce’s semiotics and related developments in biosemiotics and global semiotics (e.g. Sebeok 1998; Merrell 2001; Kotov 2002; Kull 2005). In the introduction to her monograph on Lotman, Edna Andrews stresses the need to recognize that “the works for which Lotman is best known in the West are not necessarily the most indicative of his mature thought” (Andrews 2003: xiv) and tries to “update” Lotman by positioning his theory within the broader semiotic perspective elaborated by thinkers such as Peirce, Jakobson and Sebeok.

A recent collection of articles, *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions* (Schönle 2006; see also Schönle 2002), signals an important shift in the contextualization of Lotman’s later thinking, opening it to further comparison with important thinkers in cultural studies and poststructuralism: Bakhtin, Benjamin, de Certeau, Foucault, Gramsci, Jameson, Kristeva, etc. My research partakes in the spirit of this innovative approach to Lotman studies and embodies the idea, stated by Andreas Schönle and Jeremy Schine in their introduction to the collection, that Lotman’s later thinking not only needs a new interpretation, but also further “extension” and integration, which would facilitate its potentially heuristic encounter with contemporary currents of thought within the humanities and social sciences – poststructuralism and cultural studies in particular (Schönle, Schine 2006: 7).<sup>1</sup>

As for Derrida, providing an overview of the huge amount of literature on the concept of *différance* would be a Herculean task. It is enough to state that the main thinkers referenced in this kind of research – such as Heidegger (see Donkel 1992, for instance), Levinas, Nancy, Deleuze (e.g. May 1997), Foucault (see Boyne 1990; Lucy 1995: 48–71, for example), Lyotard and

---

<sup>1</sup> In any event, it is also difficult to find any reference to Derrida in Schönle’s collection. Only Amy Mandelker mentions his name in connection with the possible influence of a Jewish background on Lotman’s (and Derrida’s) thinking (see Mandelker 2006: 72).

Rorty (e.g. Gasché 1995)<sup>2</sup> – are almost completely absent from academic articles and books on Lotman’s later work. However, even if recent writing on Derrida sometimes fails to mention this, the fundamentals upon which the elaboration of the concept of *différance* was established were developed by a theorist to whom Derrida himself often referred, the same theorist who created the framework along which Lotman’s work in particular and semiotics in general would develop. Obviously, I am referring to Ferdinand de Saussure. And it is from Saussure that I will shortly begin my comparison between Derrida and Lotman.

Before I proceed, I would like to make explicit the extra-theoretical background of this research and how I position myself within it. As is often (if not always) the case when undertaking research, the motivation for my comparison of Lotman and Derrida is not merely theoretical curiosity, but a concern for what is happening around us. The concept of “cultural identity” has gradually replaced such discredited means of identification as “race”, “ethnicity”, and even “nationality” in political, sociological and public language in recent decades. Nevertheless, the cultural identity discourse has inherited to some degree the political function of these terms and has become a fundamental instrument of the conservative shift that has hegemonized Western politics in our times. A clear example of this understanding of cultural identity is provided by the recent European polemics on integration and immigration policies. Chancellor Angela Merkel has revived the notion of *Leitkultur* as opposed to postwar Germany’s multicultural path to integration. President Nicholas Sarkozy promoted a national discussion with the aim of

---

<sup>2</sup> David Wood writes that a “Society of Friends of Difference would have to include Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Saussure, Freud, Adorno, Heidegger, Levinas, Deleuze, and Lyotard among its prominent members” (Wood 1988: ix). Other approaches are more specific: Todd May, for example, suggests that “the articulation of an adequate concept of difference” should be considered as “the overriding problem that occupies recent French thought”, which implies the generation associated with the terms “poststructuralism” and “postmodernism”: Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Kristeva, Levinas, Lyotard, Lacoue-Labarthe, LeDoeuff, Nancy (May 1997: 1–2). It is interesting that according to May’s approach, the chronology of the “theory of difference” coincides with that of Tartu–Moscow cultural semiotics; the writings of the generation of French thinkers mentioned above started to appear in the late 1960s, and the publication of the first issue of *Sign Systems Studies* (*Труды по знаковым системам*) in 1964 can be considered as the impetus which led Tartu–Moscow scholars to the new theoretical framework known as “cultural semiotics”.

determining “what it means to be French”, thus setting the boundaries of French cultural identity. Prime Minister David Cameron criticizes the “passive tolerance” of recent years and predicates the need for an active, “muscular” liberalism which would be the basis for a stronger British identity. We can of course consider these kinds of attitude as crude demagogical attempts to garner a political profit from the xenophobic feelings spreading all over Europe. In any event, we must recognize that the basis and consequences of these attitudes are more profound than the results of an election. In contemporary politics, cultural identity is conceived and described as a closed system of values with clear-cut boundaries that have to be defended from contamination. This concept of identity supports the idea that the main socio-political conflicts of our times are actually based on culture.<sup>3</sup>

Even the multiculturalist position, which can be viewed as a reaction to the risks of cultural conservatism, seems to presuppose an unquestioned conception of cultural identity, in which the emphasis is placed on the need to accept and promote the peaceful co-existence of different cultural identities within the same social space. The result has been that, rather than becoming a means of critiquing conservative conceptions of cultural identity, multiculturalism is regarded as a kind of project which should unite people of good will. The lack of critical reflection thus weakens the multiculturalist position and makes it difficult to dispute Merkel’s declaration of the death of *multikulti* or Cameron’s demonization of “state multiculturalism” as responsible for the rise of Islamic extremism in Western countries.<sup>4</sup> The claim that conflicts inevitably emerge when people living in the same social space possess different value systems is merely a platitude. But should we therefore agree with Merkel and Cameron that, in order to ensure security and peace, all differences should be assimilated into the dominating culture (*Leitkultur*)? And furthermore, is such assimilation achievable; is a univocal cultural identity even possible?

Postcolonial and cultural studies have recently challenged clear-cut notions of cultural identity by introducing the concept of “hybridity”, which blurs the boundaries between “one’s own” and “the foreign”, the “dominating” and the

---

<sup>3</sup> This idea has often been expressed as the Huntingtonian “clash of civilizations”: “It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural” (Huntington 1993: 22).

<sup>4</sup> For a critique of multiculturalism from an anti-conservative position see Žižek (2011: 43–53).

“dominated”. The hypothesis that by adopting the colonizer’s cultural patterns, the colonized inevitably contaminates and transforms those patterns, clearly contradicts the presumed autonomy and primacy of a hegemonic *Leitkultur*.<sup>5</sup>

To return to Lotman and Derrida, I will explore in the following another way of questioning the notion of (cultural) identity. The question is not simply how existing cultural identities interact to engender a third, hybrid identity, nor how persons with different cultural identities might live together peacefully. My comparison of Lotman and Derrida will lead to the conclusion that the function of culture and, more generally, of human communication should not be primarily understood in terms of identity.

Therefore, this article is intended to challenge the notion of “identity” from a theoretical point of view. It also means that my research was conceived as a thorough critique of the conservative cultural identity discourse to which I have briefly referred above. Theoretical work in any empirical field is always an intervention into that field. Tartu–Moscow scholars already pointed to this inevitably double nature of theoretical constructions in their *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Culture* (1973): “any scientific idea may be regarded as an attempt to cognize culture and as a fact of its life through which its generating mechanisms take effect” (Ivanov *et al.* 1998: 60).<sup>6</sup>

The following comparison could not and is not meant to be a close reading of Derrida and Lotman. My intention is to establish a general framework for more detailed analyses by describing what could be considered as a kind of isomorphism between the general logic of Lotman’s and Derrida’s approaches. The central concepts of their theories arise, in my opinion, from similar problematic horizons and also point to similar ways of positioning oneself in relation to them.

---

<sup>5</sup> As Arjun Appadurai observes, “at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized”, being “absorbed into local political and cultural economies” (Appadurai 1996: 42, 32). We should add that today, immigrants to Western countries also “foreignize” indigenous “forces” by introducing other issues and accents. Postcolonial scholars sometimes use the concept of “creolization”, which also plays a central role in Lotman’s cultural semiotics, as a synonym for hybridity.

<sup>6</sup> This is why, as Peeter Torop explains, “the dynamism of culture as a research object forces science to search for new description languages but the new description languages in turn influence the cultural dynamics as they offer new possibilities for self-description” (Torop 2009: xxxiii).

## The inside and the outside: impelling Saussurean separations

As I have already mentioned, a preliminary analysis of Derrida's and Lotman's works reveals that, in spite of the huge differences between the intellectual environments in which their work developed, the two thinkers share what could be called the starting point of their theoretical enterprise. This common starting point can be said to be Derrida's and Lotman's critical rethinking of the fundamentals of Saussurean semiology.<sup>7</sup> In essence, we could say that Derrida and Lotman developed the Saussurean notion of difference into an (anti-structuralist) critique of the internalizing self-enclosure, which allowed Saussure to delimit and describe *langue* as a system separate from *parole*.

Saussure established the fundamentals of his linguistics (and semiology) by means of a theoretical process I have elsewhere described as a "procedure of totalization" (see Monticelli 2008). The definition of a linguistic system is, in other words, a question of delimitation – the setting of relevant boundaries which allows an actually partial aspect of language to coincide with the object of study "in its entirety" (Saussure 2000: 8; see also Derrida 1997: 33–34). A consequence of this delimitation of boundaries is the opening<sup>8</sup> of an internal space (*langue*) – structured and intelligible according to an intrinsic law – separate from external space (*parole*) – a series of disparate, heterogeneous elements which do not immanently conform to the constraints of the systemic law. Saussure insisted on the essential need to keep the internal and external points of view distinct, and to never "blur the boundaries which separate the two domains" (Saussure 2000: 20–23).

---

<sup>7</sup> This is quite clear for Lotman as a "semiotician" (see also Lotman 2000: 4–6). However, as Andrews observes in the introduction to the English translation of *Culture and Explosion*, "Lotman wanted to present his ideas as fundamental not only to a semiotic approach to language, culture and text, but as more general concepts that are applicable within a variety of methodological approaches" (Andrews 2009: xx). Conversely, for Derrida as a "philosopher" or "(French) thinker", it was of the greatest importance to re-frame the entire Western philosophical tradition within the new horizon opened up by semiological research in the field of language and signification; in *Of Grammatology* he writes that "our historico-metaphysical epoch must finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon" (Derrida 1997: 6).

<sup>8</sup> "[...] the opening of the field [...] also amounts to a delimitation of the field" (Derrida 1982: 140).

Structuralism extended the procedure of totalization that Saussure had applied to the study of language to the study of other sign systems and texts.<sup>9</sup> The so-called “semiotic reductionism” can be described as the delimiting separation of a given semiotic space (structure, system, code or text) and its transformation into an isolated, discrete whole with its own distinct boundaries. This separation is assumed to make possible the exhaustive study of the meaning and identity of the phenomena that belong to the internal space, while disregarding external elements as irrelevant. It is from this methodological standpoint that it becomes possible to place (as did Derrida) structuralist semiology into a broader theoretical context, and to discern the areas where it resonates with Western metaphysics.

Derrida and Lotman called into question Saussure’s procedure of totalization, the separation, closeness and interiority of linguistic and other semiotic systems.<sup>10</sup> As Lotman programmatically stated in the opening lines of *Culture and Explosion*, “the fundamental questions relating to the description of any semiotic system are, firstly, its relation to the extra-system, to the world which lies beyond its borders...” (Lotman 2009: 1). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida criticized Saussure’s (and many others’) understanding of writing (*écriture*) as “the external representation of language”, which is not essentially related to the internal linguistic system; similarly to Lotman, he contested this separation and highlighted the complex interplay between the internal and the external: “The outside bears with the inside a relationship that is, as usual, anything but simple exteriority. The meaning of the outside was always present within the inside, imprisoned outside the outside, and vice versa” (Derrida 1997: 35). The process of deconstruction does not “destroy structures from the outside” (as it is often simplistically described), but rather erodes the borders of the structure by generating short-circuits between the internal and the external.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Lotman enumerates as the bases of “traditional structuralism” systemic closeness, self-sufficiency, separation, and isolation in time and space (see Lotman 2009: 13).

<sup>10</sup> I agree with Andreas Schönle and Jeremy Shine when they describe Lotman’s later works as attempts “to go beyond the Saussurean foundations of his earlier semiotics” (Schönle, Shine 2006: 7).

<sup>11</sup> In *Positions* Derrida described grammatological thought as “the thought for which there is no sure opposition between outside and inside” (Derrida 1981: 12). Derrida’s work has often been understood as completing the transition from the metaphysics of interiority – “the era of consciousness” – to the privileging of exteriority – the “era of textuality” (see Strozier 1988, for instance). Instead of this opposition between the inside and the outside, I am emphasizing the Derridean problematization of the relationship between them.

An initial examination of the strategies followed by Lotman and Derrida in their respective attempts to contest the Saussurean delimiting separation between the outside and the inside reveals an important discrepancy between the two thinkers' approaches, which we have to keep in mind in the following discussion. Describing the discrepancy from a general and abstract point of view, we could say that Lotman concentrated on phenomena at the systemic level; heterogeneity, asymmetry, binarism and the related notion of translation are applicable to the relationships between complex systems such as texts, languages, or other sign systems. In his theory of *différance*, Derrida seemed to focus mainly on single elements such as signs, signifiers and signifieds. In any event, the kind of isomorphism that I have mentioned above and will now describe emerges between these different levels of analysis. This is why my work is an attempt not only to compare but also to reciprocally integrate Lotman's and Derrida's theories.<sup>12</sup>

### **Rethinking totality: semiosphere and textuality**

As noted above, Saussure described the linguistic system (*langue*) as a "self-contained whole" (Saussure 2000: 10), the closure and autonomy of which are achieved on the basis of a separation between an internal and an external space and the consequent exclusion ("disregard" is the word Saussure used) of a series of "facts of language (*langage*)". Hence the paradox: the linguistic system emerges as a whole – "*Langue*, seen from an internal point of view is... PERFECTLY WHOLE" (Saussure 2006: 57) – only insofar as another presupposed totality ("*all* manifestations of human language") is dismembered, set apart, liquidated. This paradox is also the reason why critiquing Saussurean delimiting separation led both Lotman and Derrida to reconceptualize the relationship between unity and totality, the part and the whole, limitedness and openness. The basis for this revision is what Derrida called "numerousness" in "Dissemination" and Lotman termed "(at least)

---

<sup>12</sup> In any case, the difference in Lotman's and Derrida's levels of analysis has to be conceived as a theoretical tendency not as a systematic and exclusive choice. For instance, if the above-mentioned refusal of Saussurean separations is generally presented by Lotman in systemic terms, we can also find in his texts formulations of this refusal which relate to single elements such as signs: "The idea that the starting point of any semiotic system is not the simple isolated sign (word), but rather the relation between at least two signs causes us to think in a different way about the fundamental bases of semiosis" (Lotman 2009: 172).



binarism”: totality is not one, but at least two; not unity, but numerousness or plurality.

Thus, for Lotman, “the smallest functioning semiotic mechanism” cannot be a singular system like Saussure’s *langue*, but must consist of “at least two semiotic mechanisms (languages) which are in a relationship of mutual untranslatability, yet at the same time being similar since by its own means each of them models one and the same extrasemiotic reality” (Lotman 1997: 10; see also Lotman 2009: 4–6). Lotman described this paradoxical situation as a union of symmetry-asymmetry that he called a “mirror structure”, producing “untranslatable, yet similar reflections” (Lotman 1997: 10). Insofar as extrasemiotic reality is in itself inapprehensible, we are left from the outset with the play of its reflections between reciprocally untranslatable languages. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida used a similar strategy to introduce his critique of Saussure’s “phonologocentrism” and marginalization of writing. At a crucial point in his argument, we find a passage that resembles Lotman’s “mirror structure”:

representation mingles with what it represents, to the point where [...] one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer. [...] In this play of representation the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split in itself and not only as an addition to itself of its image. The reflection, the image, the double, splits what it doubles. The origin of the speculation becomes a difference. What can look at itself is not one; and the law of addition of the origin to its representation, of the thing to its image, is that one plus one makes at least three. (Derrida 1997: 36)

According to Lotman, the mirror structure reveals that what was thought of as originary unity and self-identity is actually characterized by difference from the very beginning:

The dialogue partner is located within the “I” as one of its components or, conversely, the “I” is part of the constitution of the partner [...]. The need for the “other” is the need for the origin of the self; a partner is needed insofar as he/she presents a different model of the familiar reality, a different interpretation of the familiar text. (Lotman 1990: 409; my translation – D. M.)

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Lotman also employed, on the systemic level, Derrida’s numerical idea of splitting. Lotman used it to conceptualize the relationship between similarity and difference, on the one hand, and between

the whole and the part, on the other. In fact, the constitutive dualism of any semiotic mechanism is transposed and reproduced within each of its parts, each active language being continuously bisected and itself constituting a binary system (Lotman 2002: 2650–2659). The situation therefore arises in which being part of a whole – a binary system – implies being a whole in itself – a binary system (Lotman 1997: 12). And conversely, the fact that any whole is constituted of (at least) two parts also means that any whole is also part of a bigger whole. Transformation into a part requires completion or supplementation of the whole (Derrida 2000: 56), but this makes separation and self-enclosure impossible.

This is why Lotmanian binarism cannot be reduced to the structuralistic notion of binary opposition. On the contrary, the binary maintains within the semiotic continuum an irreducibly “plural” character, functioning as a mechanism for the multiplication of languages: “binarism, however, must be understood as a principle which is realized in *plurality* since every newly-formed language is in its turn subdivided on a binary principle” (Lotman 2000: 124). Here, as in the quotation from Derrida, one plus one makes (at least) three. This is, in my opinion, the fundamental intuition at the heart of Lotman’s conception of the semiosphere. If “three” is the mediating number, mediation leads here to unbounded proliferation – an “avalanche”, as Lotman writes (see Lotman 2002: 2654), or “dissemination” in Derrida’s terms.

The earlier Tartu–Moscow theory of language and culture as primary and secondary modelling systems, respectively, which focuses on the relationship between separate semiotic systems and external reality, should be reconsidered in the light of Lotman’s later theory of the semiosphere, which focuses instead on the position of different systems along a semiotic continuum. Even if a semiotic system remains, in Lotman’s words, “a generator of structurality”, which transforms “the open world of *realia* into the closed world of names” (Lotman, Uspenskij 2001: 42), this is possible only because any semiotic system, culture and language presupposes an open semiosphere in which the play of reflection (binarism, asymmetry and heterogeneity) constantly displaces and reconfigures the relationships between semiotic units and *realia*.

Derrida similarly concluded that writing is not an irrelevant externality in respect to the interiority of language, but, on the contrary, that (archi-)writing as an open field of textuality “comprehends” and “goes beyond the essence” of language (Derrida 1997: 7). It is in this context that we should interpret the famous and ubiquitously quoted claim of Derrida: “there is nothing outside the

text” (*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*) (see, for instance, Derrida 1997: 163). It would be incorrect to understand textuality as an internal space, a self-enclosed totality in terms of Saussure’s *langue*. On the contrary, (archi-)writing as a space of textuality should be understood neither as absolute exteriority nor total interiority, but precisely as the impossibility of conclusively separating and delimiting an interiority from exteriority. In my opinion, the same can be said for Lotman’s semiosphere.<sup>13</sup>

In Derrida’s theory of archi-writing/textuality and Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere, the focus shifts from (structuralistic) totalization, by which a given semiotic system is made into a separate whole with clear-cut boundaries, to an infinite and open totality, which “comprehends” any system and makes it vulnerable to the effects of numerousness and plurality. Laying the foundations for this revisited conception of totality, Lotman’s binarism/plurality and Derrida’s numerousness function as instruments for the deconstruction of originary unity – such as the Saussurean “natural bond” between the signifier and the signified (on which Derrida focused), or the Saussurean self-enclosure of the linguistic system (to which Lotman turned his attention).<sup>14</sup>

### **The construction of identity: metalinguistic self-description and the transcendental signified**

Although Lotman and Derrida established that any semiotic space must be understood in terms of plurality and heterogeneity rather than oneness and sameness, they nevertheless analyzed the mechanisms by which our culture has tried to construct unity and self-identity out of originary plurality/numerousness. This can be described in Derrida’s terminology as an attempt to “exorcize” the mirror structure. Once again, Derrida focused on a single element that he called the “transcendental signified”, while Lotman identified a systemic unit that he termed the “metalanguage of self-description”.

---

<sup>13</sup> Peeter Torop writes about a “new understanding of holism” which emerges from the Lotmanian opposition of a “communicating whole” to a “delimited whole” (Torop 2005).

<sup>14</sup> It is important to highlight an interesting difference between Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere and Derrida’s theory of textuality. If Derrida’s space of textuality coincides with the “total structure” of archi-writing, which is based on discreteness/spacing, articulation, and demotivation, for Lotman, this kind of structuring force enters within the semiosphere into dialogue/collision with another kind of structuring force that is based on iconicity, continuity, and motivation.

According to Derrida, the onto-theological exorcism of the mirror structure occurs through “reference to the meaning of a signified thinkable and possible outside all signifiers” (Derrida 1997: 73). Such a “transcendental signified” is that which “in and of itself, in its essence, would refer to no signifier, would exceed the chain of signs, and would no longer itself function as a signifier” (Derrida 1981: 19–20). The transcendence of the transcendental signified is therefore due to its particular position in respect to all the other elements of the structure – as Derrida explained, “the centre is paradoxically *within* the structure and *outside* it” (Derrida 2004: 352), and is the only element of the structure which, while governing that structure, escapes “structurality” and is safe from the play of reflection and numerousness. This is why resorting to a transcendental signified brings about a centralization, hierarchization and delimitation of the boundaries of the field of textuality, the “chain of signs” which is thus given a stable foundation, origin, and end.

According to Lotman, the semiotic space is centred and structured into a homogeneous totality by a process in which one of the languages of the semiotic space acquires a dominant position (see Lotman 1990: 254–255). This language thus becomes a metalanguage which enables the different systems of the semiotic space to be counted as one. It is the “*nuclear* structure” and occupies the “core” of the semiotic space, but it possesses a different status from all the other systems of that space; it functions as “the *transcendental* unity of self-consciousness” (employing a Kantian concept adopted by Lotman). The semiotic space is thus organized into a homogeneous structural whole, in which the plurality of systems is reduced to a “single, definitive truth” (Lotman 1990: 254–255; Lotman, Uspenskij 2001: 65). Lotman wrote of “the idealization of a real language” which leads to an “ideological self-portrait” or “mythologized image” of culture as opposed to “real cultures” and “real texts” which are always characterized by oscillation between at least two different systems (Lotman 1990: 408; 2000: 129; Lotman, Uspenskij 2001: 132–133).

The metalanguage of self-description is subtracted from the play of reflection and differentiation, and is also, in Derrida’s terminology, an “outside-within” of the semiotic space. Anyway, for Lotman this transcendence is not firstly attached to presumably originary meanings, but described as a “central codifying mechanism”, functioning, one might say, as a generator of transcendental signifiers which are imposed as universal and homogenizing forms of expression onto the various contents circulating within the semiotic space

(Lotman 1990: 407–408; 2000: 222; Lotman, Uspenskij 2001: 39–68).<sup>15</sup> In Marxian terminology, we could describe the metalanguage of self-description regulating the communicative exchange within the homogenized semiotic space as a kind of “general equivalent” (see Marx 1967)<sup>16</sup> which establishes and warrants the principle of “universal translatability” (see Lotman 1985: 89) within the internal space, and excludes from the latter all elements which cannot be translated into the metalanguage. Derrida attributed the same function to the transcendental signified: “the theme of a transcendental signified took shape within the horizon of an absolutely pure, transparent and unequivocal translatability” (Derrida 1981: 20). In his *Specters of Marx*, he characterized this kind of translation in the following way:

Guaranteed translatability, given homogeneity, systematic coherence in their *absolute forms*, this is surely (certainly, a priori and not probably) what renders [...] the other *impossible* [...]. There must be disjunction, interruption, the heterogeneous if at least *there must be*, if *there must be* a chance given to any “there must be” [...]. (Derrida 2006: 42)

Lotman wrote in the same vein of the risks of metalinguistic self-description exhausting the reserve of indeterminacy of a given semiotic space, which may thus lose its dynamism, become inflexible and incapable of further development (Lotman 1990: 266; 2000: 134).

### **Deconstructing identity: dialogue and *différance***

The transcendental and idealizing centring of semiotic space (the space of textuality) described by Lotman and Derrida transforms the plurality that constitutes any semiotic system into a closed unity, a totality with clear-cut boundaries: the Derridean “play of the signifiers” is effaced by the

---

<sup>15</sup> Still, the “central-codifying mechanism” strongly relates to and leads to transcendental signification also in Lotman’s case: “The law-forming centre of culture, genetically deriving from the primordial mythological nucleus, reconstructs the world as something totally ordered, with a single plot and a supreme meaning” (Lotman 2000: 162).

<sup>16</sup> Marx described in his genealogy of exchange value and money the mechanism by which an immanent and real element of a given set becomes a transcendental and ideal equivalent of all other elements of that set: “Gold is money with reference to all other commodities only because it was previously, with reference to them, a simple commodity” (Marx 1967: 70).

transcendental signified; the Lotmanian heterogeneity and pluralism of the semiotic space is effaced by metalinguistic self-description. The mediation effected by the transcendental signified and the metalanguage of self-description resembles the Hegelian logic of *Aufhebung* in which the three (or the third) no longer functions as an index of plurality but becomes the point of access to the unity of the one.

Lotman's conception of dialogue (or translation of the untranslatable) and Derrida's concept of *différance* present us with a process of mediation which maintains plurality and numerousness, is not reducible to stable or definitive sublation/acquisition and frustrates the pretence of self-identity by constantly dislocating and counteracting any attempts at semiotic closure.

According to Lotman, the most fundamental mechanism of the semiosphere is translation, but there are different types (and different *topoi* – places) of translation which correspond to different kinds of mediation. The metalanguage of self-description functions as a universal translational device at the centre of the semiotic space and univocally determines its boundaries: on the inner side, what is translatable, and on the outer side, what cannot be translated. The other possibility Lotman considered was to conceive of the boundary rather than the centre as the place of translation. This implies the redefinition of the notion of boundary.

Connecting (or translating) boundaries cannot be viewed as monodimensional lines of separation; they are, on the contrary, multidimensional, complex spaces which Lotman also described as “bilingual belts” (Lotman 1999: 16). From the standpoint of metalinguistic (transcendental) self-description, the boundary serves to separate the semiotic space from what is external to it. From the point of view of its “immanent mechanism”, the boundary as a bilingual belt connects different semiotic systems and opens them to an interplay which Lotman defines as “dialogue” or “translation in cases of untranslatability”, where translatability is not guaranteed (recalling the quotation from Derrida), but hindered or even impossible from the perspective of the metalanguage of self-description.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> This is why Lotman's conception of “dialogue” is not reducible to the kind of wishful thinking that often accompanies the understanding of multiculturalism as a project to be undertaken. Lotman's characterization of dialogue as a kind of impossible but inevitable translation reveals the difficulties and problems (including possible conflicts) with this kind of mediation. It is therefore not surprising that he chooses the word “tension” (which

Translation of the untranslatable, which clearly differs from the universal translatability described above, crosses the boundary between different semiotic systems. Whereas metasystemic translation is expected to be complete, exhaustive, and the only correct and possible option, eliminating all untranslatable residues by relegating them outside the boundaries of the semiotic space, intersystemic translation (translation in the bilingual periphery) is always difficult, inadequate and partial. This implies that different translations are all equally correct (or equally incorrect) and that each translation generates an untranslatable residue which will always be the point of departure for new (similarly inadequate and partial) translations. Mediation does not lead to univocity, unequivocalness and homogeneity. On the contrary, the translational exchange continuously and incrementally adds to the potential meaning by actualizing it in ways that are different and unpredictable (see Lotman 1990: 405–406; 1985: 86, 121–124).

The two main properties of Lotmanian translation in cases of untranslatability are, therefore, (1) inexhaustibility: since the untranslated residue is never eliminated, new and unpredictable texts are always emerging in the process of translation, thus deferring the establishment of a final, definitive text; and (2) irreversibility: if we translate the text back, or, in other words, if we cross the boundary in the other direction, we never regain the original text, but always obtain a new one.

These properties of Lotman's "translation of the untranslatable" coincide significantly with the concept of *différance* as employed by Derrida to deconstruct the transcendental signified. First of all, Derrida, like Lotman, clearly relates the theme of *différance* to a kind of "inadequation" that triggers the opening of a border-space: "The liminal space is thus opened up by an inadequation between the form and the content of discourse or by an incommensurability between the signifier and the signified" (Derrida 2000: 18).<sup>18</sup> It is on the basis of this inadequacy or "difference between the signifier and the signified" that Derrida writes of "the impurity of translation" and contrasts it to the transparency and unequivocalness of the ideal translation operating through the transcendental signified: "We will never have, and in fact

---

may generate "explosions") to describe dialogue as the contact and collision of different systems within the semiotic space.

<sup>18</sup> Lotman writes in a similar vein of the periphery as the place where "our language" is "someone else's language" and "someone else's language" our own (Lotman 1985: 110; Lotman, Uspenskij 1984: 4).

have never had, to do with some ‘transport’ of pure signifieds from one language to another, or within one and the same language, that the signifying instrument would leave virgin and untouched” (Derrida 1981: 20).

The two conceptual sides brought together by Derrida in his neographism correspond to the two main properties of Lotman’s translation of the untranslatable. As Derrida explains in the essay *Différance* (republished in *Margins of Philosophy*, 1982: 1–28), the first conceptual side of *différance* is “deferring” (“detouring, delaying, relaying”) the determination of meaning (the continual generation of new translations in Lotman’s theory) which implies the inexhaustibility of the translational residue. Derrida terms the latter the “supplement” or “reserve”.<sup>19</sup> The second conceptual side of *différance* is the more common “differing”: “to be not identical, to be other, discernible” – the non-self-identity of that which was supposed to be original, and, therefore, its non-originary status (in Lotman’s framework, the new “originals” or reverse translations).<sup>20</sup>

It is important to emphasize that both Lotman and Derrida assert the primacy of dialogue and *différance* (which also means the primacy of plurality and numerosness) over sameness and homogeneous unity. In Lotman’s words, “[...] dialogue precedes language and gives birth to it. [...] Without the semiosphere, language not only does not function, it does not exist” (Lotman 2005: 218–219). The “semiotic situation” – or “dialogic situation” – precedes the instruments of semiosis and the semiotic act (Lotman 2000: 144; see also Andrews 2003: 32), insofar as it enables the articulation of the heterogeneous, which is essential to any language and communication.

Derrida is saying fundamentally the same thing when he claims that there is no presence before or apart from semiological difference (Derrida 1982: 12).

---

<sup>19</sup> Lotman also uses the concept of “reserve (of indeterminacy)” to describe the translational residue (Lotman 2000: 227).

<sup>20</sup> Semiotic non-identity, or difference, is, according to Lotman, the essential precondition of dialogue: “[...] the text to be translated must already contain elements of transition to the new language. Otherwise dialogue is impossible” (Lotman 1999: 24; my translation – D. M.). It is interesting to observe that, as in *différance*, translation of the untranslatable is characterized by the paradoxical topology of the periphery and also introduces a paradoxical temporality in which (future) deferral always deconstructs (past) originality. This is why Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere should be viewed in the light of his later observations on history (see Lotman 2009). In my dissertation, I provided a detailed analysis and some comparison of Derrida’s and Lotman’s concepts of temporality (see Monticelli 2008: 88–109).



This primacy of *différance* does not imply origin or beginning; Derrida himself often warns against this kind of interpretation. *Différance* should, on the contrary, be conceived as a process which he calls “play” or “production of differences”:

Therefore one has to admit, before any dissociation of language and speech, code and message, etc. (and everything that goes along with this dissociation) a systematic production of differences, the *production* of a system of differences. (Derrida 1981: 28)

The Lotmanian “dialogic situation” should be understood in the same “processual” terms.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

The logic of Derrida’s and Lotman’s theories is comparable primarily because both theoretical constructions are inspired by what I would define as an “opening orientation of thought”. Instead of regarding identity-generating delimitations as the original function of culture, Lotman and Derrida describe them as attempts to efface the constitutive plurality and heterogeneity of the semiotic space. A critical revision of the Saussurean conceptual model leads them to describe an open totality based on plurality and difference which enables the emergence of any particular semiotic system (language, text, culture, etc.) and precludes any definite self-enclosure of those systems. Whereas Derrida (1997: 7) writes of “archi-writing” and the production of differences as “comprehending and exceeding” language,<sup>22</sup> the “immersion” of any singular system into the semiosphere means, in Lotman’s view, the inescapable contact of the system with its alterity, which is responsible for the endless re-articulation of the system itself.

To conclude, and return to the approach and terminology employed at the beginning of this article, we can assert from a reading of Lotman and Derrida that before (and, of course, still after) being expelled from any given cultural space as a dangerous alterity which must be avoided or, in the worse case, destroyed, difference and translation of the untranslatable constituted (and

---

<sup>21</sup> This is also the reason why hypostatizing interpretations of the semiosphere should be avoided. The semiosphere is the methodological device Lotman used to represent the theoretical primacy of the dialogical situation over the “instruments of semiosis”.

<sup>22</sup> “The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general, affects them always already, the moment they enter the game” (Derrida 1997: 7).

continue to constitute) the most essential mechanism by which cultural identity continuously constructs and deconstructs itself.

This is why a comparison of Derrida and Lotman may provide important lines of reasoning with which to contest from a theoretical standpoint the conservative understanding of cultural identity that is currently being used as an ideological justification for social and political conflicts. The intent of this article was to sketch the general outlines of a comparison which needs to be developed into more detailed analyses concentrating on particular aspects and discussing not only the similarities but also the important differences between Lotman's and Derrida's theories.<sup>23</sup>

## References

- Alexandrov, Vladimir, E. 2000. Biology, semiosis and cultural difference in Lotman's Semiosphere. *Comparative Literature* 52(4): 339–362.
- Andrews, Edna 2003. *Conversations with Lotman: Cultural Semiotics in Language, Literature, and Cognition*. Buffalo: University of Toronto Press.
- 2009. Introduction. In: Lotman, Juri, *Culture and Explosion*. (Clark, Wilma, trans.) Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, xix–xxvi.
- Appadurai, Arjun 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Boyne, Roy 1990. *Foucault and Derrida: The Other Side of Reason*. London: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques 1981. *Positions*. (Bass, Alan, trans.) Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. (Bass, Alan, trans.) Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- 1997. *Of Grammatology*. (Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, trans.) Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 2000. *Dissemination*. (Johnson, Barbara, trans.) London: The Athlone Press.
- 2004. *Writing and Difference*. (Bass, Alan, trans.) London: Routledge.
- 2006. *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. (Kamuf, Peggy, trans.) New York: Routledge.
- Donkel, Douglas L. 1992. *The Understanding of Difference in Heidegger and Derrida*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Gasché, Rodolphe 1995. *Inventions of Difference. On Jacques Derrida*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

---

<sup>23</sup> The article was written with the support of Estonian Science Foundation grant no. 8152 “Translators (Re)shaping Culture Repertoire”. I am grateful to Dolores Lindsay for her precious linguistic help.

- Huntington, Samuel P. 1993. The clash of civilizations? *Foreign Affairs* 72: 22–50.
- Ivanov, Viatcheslav V.; Lotman, Yuri M.; Pjatigorskij, Aleksandr M.; Toporov, Vladimir N.; Uspenskij, Boris A. 1998[1973]. *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures*. (Salupere, Silvi, trans.) Tartu: Tartu University Press.
- Kotov, Kaie 2002. Semiosphere: A chemistry of being. *Signs Systems Studies* 30(1): 41–52.
- Kull, Kalevi 2005. Semiosphere and a dual ecology. Paradoxes of communication. *Sign Systems Studies* 33(1): 175–189.
- Lotman, Juri M. 1985. *La semiosfera. L'asimmetria e il dialogo nelle strutture pensanti*. (Salvestroni, Simonetta, ed.) Venezia: Marsilio.
- 1990. *Kultuurisemiootika: tekst – kirjandus – kultuur*. (Lias, Pärt; Soms, Inta; Veidemann, Rein, trans.) Tallinn: Olion.
  - 1997. Culture as subject and object of itself. *Trames* 1(1) (51/46): 7–16.
  - 1999. *Semiosfäärist*. (Pruul, Kajar, ed., trans.) Tallinn: Vagabund.
  - 2005. On the semiosphere. *Sign Systems Studies* 33(1): 205–229.
  - 2000. *Universe of the Mind*. (Shukman, Ann, trans.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
  - 2009. *Culture and Explosion*. (Clark, Wilma, trans.) Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Lotman, Juri M.; Uspenskij, Boris A. 1984. The role of dual models in the dynamics of Russian culture (up to the end of the eighteenth century). In: Shukman, Ann (ed.), *The Semiotics of Russian Culture* (Michigan Slavic Contributions 11). Ann Arbor: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, 3–35.
- 2001. *Tipologia della cultura*. (Faccani, Remo; Marzaduri, Marzio, eds.; Faccani, Manila Barbatto; Faccani, Remo; Marzaduri, Marzio; Molinari, Sergio, trans.) Milano: Bompiani.
- Lucy, Niall 1995. *Debating Derrida*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Mandelker, Amy 1994. Semiotizing the sphere: Organicistic theory in Lotman, Bakhtin and Vernadsky. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* 109(N3): 385–396.
- 2006. Lotman's Other: Estrangement and ethics in *Culture and Explosion*. In: Schönle, Andreas (ed.), *Lotman and Cultural Studies. Encounters and Extensions*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 59–83.
- Marx, Karl 1967. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume 1: The Process of Capitalist Production*. New York: International Publishers.
- May, Todd 1997. *Reconsidering Difference. Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, and Deleuze*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Merrell, Floyd 2001. Lotman's semiosphere, Peirce's categories, and cultural forms of life. *Sign Systems Studies* 29(2): 385–415.
- Monticelli, Daniele 2008. *Wholeness and its Remainders: Theoretical Procedures of Totalization and Detotalization in Semiotics, Philosophy and Politics*. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.
- Reid, Allan 1990. *Literature as Communication and Cognition in Bakhtin and Lotman*. New York: Garland.

- Sanchez, Manuel Càceres 1999. Scientific thought and work of Yuri Lotman. *Sign Systems Studies* 27: 46–59.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de 2000. *Course in General Linguistics*. (Bally, Charles; Sechehaye, Albert; Riedlinger, Albert, eds.; Harris, Roy, trans.) London: Duckworth.
- 2006. *Writings in General Linguistics*. (Bouquet, Simon; Engler, Rudolf, eds.; Sanders, Carol; Pires, Matthew, trans.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schönle, Andreas 2002. Lotman and cultural studies: The case for cross-fertilization. *Signs Systems Studies* 30(2): 429–440.
- Schönle, Andreas (ed.) 2006. *Lotman and Cultural Studies. Encounters and Extensions*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Schönle, Andreas; Shine, Jeremy 2006. Introduction. In: Schönle, Andreas (ed.), *Lotman and Cultural Studies. Encounters and Extensions*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 3–40.
- Sebeok, Thomas A. 1998. *A Sign is Just a Sign. La semiotica globale*. (Petrilli, Susan, ed., trans.) Milano: Spirali.
- Shukman, Ann 1989. Semiotics of culture and the influence of M. M. Bakhtin. In: Einermacher, Karl; Grzybek, Peter; Witte, Georg (eds.), *Issues in Slavic Literary and Cultural Theory*. Bochum: Universitätsverlag Dr. Norbert Brockmeyer, 193–207.
- Strozier, Robert 1988. *Saussure, Derrida, and the Metaphysics of Subjectivity*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Torop, Peeter 2005. Semiosphere and/as the research object of semiotics of culture. *Sign Systems Studies* 33(1): 159–171.
- 2009. Foreword. Lotmanian explosion. In: Lotman, Juri, *Culture and Explosion*. (Clark, Wilma, trans.) Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, xxvii–xxxix.
- Wood, David 1988. Introduction. In: Wood, David; Bernasconi, Robert (eds.), *Derrida and Différance*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, ix–xii.
- Žižek, Slavoj 2011. *Living in the End Times*. London: Verso.

**Вызов идентичности:  
лотмановский “перевод непереводаемого” и  
différance Деррида**

В политическом и социологическом дискурсе, а также в публичной риторике последних десятилетий понятие культуры постепенно стало заменять такие дискредитированные и непригодные более к употреблению понятия, как “раса”, “этнос”, в некоторых случаях даже “нация”, при этом прибегая к этим понятиям в консервативных политических программах. В современном консервативном дискурсе идентичности культура понимается как закрытая система с четкими границами, которую надо защищать от внешних влияний. Такое понимание культуры служит идеологическим основанием для социально-политических конфликтов.

Teoorii Деррида и Лотмана служат полезными инструментами для деконструкции этого понимания культурной идентичности, которое в последнее время стало идеологическим обоснованием социально-политических конфликтов. Фактически, их теории исходят из основательной критики типа интернализации самоопределения, которое позволило Соссюру выделять и описывать язык как объект лингвистики. Оба мыслителя развивают свои теории языка и культуры, исходя из антиструктуралистской позиции, отрицая возможность закрытости и отделения языковых (и других семиотических) систем. Автор статьи сравнивает основные компоненты этого теоретического направления в трудах Лотмана и Деррида, сосредотачиваясь на понятиях зеркальной структуры, бинаризма, численности, текстуальности и семиосферы. На основе сравнения вырисовывается концепция целостности, границы и опосредованности, которая подтачивает претензии дискурса идентичности, так как в лотмановской семиосфере и в поле текстуальности

### **Väljakutse identiteedile: Lotmani "tõlkimatuse tõlge" ja Derrida *différance***

Viimaste kümnendite poliitilises ja sotsioloogilises diskursuses ning avalikus retoorikas on kultuuri mõiste järk-järgult hakanud asendada selliseid diskrediteeritud ja kasutamiskõlbmatuid mõisteid nagu "rass", "etnos", mõnel juhul isegi "rahvus", pärides samas nende mõistete koha konservatiivsetes poliitilistes agendades. Tänapäeva konservatiivses identiteedidiskursuses mõistetakse kultuuri kui kindlate piiridega suletud süsteemi, mida tuleb kaitsta väliste mõjutuste eest. Selline arusaam kultuurist toimub ideoloogilise põhjendusega sotsiaal-poliitilistele konfliktidele.

Derrida ja Lotmani võrdlev käsitlus pakub olulisi teoreetilisi vahendeid sellise kultuurikontseptsiooni kahtluse alla seadmiseks. Mõlemad mõtlejad arendavad oma keele- ja kultuuriteooriaid lähtudes antistrukturealistlikust positsioonist, mis eitab keeleliste (ja muude semiootiliste) süsteemide suletuse ja eraldumise võimalikkust. Artiklis võrreldakse sellise teoreetilise suunitluse peamisi komponente Derrida ja Lotmani töödes, keskendudes peeglistruktuuri, binarismi, arvulisuse, tekstuaalsuse ja semiosfääri mõistetele. Võrdlusest joonistub tervikkuse, piiri ja vahendatuse kontseptsioon, mis õõnestab identiteedidiskursuse pretensioone, kuna Lotmani semiosfääris ja Derrida tekstuaalsuse väljas tasakaalustab igasugust süsteemse sulgemise katset teine, vastupidine ja olemuslikum jõud. Lotmani "tõlkimatuse tõlget" ja Derrida *différance*'i analüüsitakse artiklis kui sarnaseid viise, kirjeldamaks süsteemi piiridel toimuvat avavat vahetust.

Kultuuri (de)konstruktiivne loomus, nii nagu seda kirjeldavad Lotman ja Derrida, vastandub katsele näha kultuuri paratamatult antud ja lõplikult fikseeritud identiteetide / erinevuste allikana.