

Methodological issues and prospects of semiotics of humour

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Abstract. This article aims at proposing a way to identify humour by means of Greimassian semiotics and to single humour out as a unique object of semiotic analysis. Firstly, the article discusses the fundamental epistemological premises of semiotic text analysis through the analysis of texts by Greimas which were meant to further and legitimize his project of semiotics. Also, the already existing attempts at providing a semiotic definition of humour are critically evaluated while relating their problematic aspects with the implicitly defined field of semiotic interest. Finally, it is demonstrated that a productive semiotic description of a comic text is possible when the *status quo* epistemological views are revised and the traditional field of semiotic analyses is expanded accordingly.

Keywords: semiotics; phenomenology; humour; Greimas; narrative grammar; meaning; event

Although different disciplines in the humanities, from psychology to linguistics, have proposed several theories of humour, hitherto semiotics has been lacking a universally accepted methodology fit for explanation and description of humour. Naturally, the question arises: is this object irrelevant to semiotics or does it, so far, have no adequate tools of analysis with regard to this problematic? As language and literature are among the main objects of semiotics, humour should be part of the sphere of semiotic interest. The more so, there were some attempts, even if they were not without fault, at describing comic texts by semiotic means. Therefore I believe that before trying to overcome such a methodological inadequacy, one should first of all reveal its causes. With this aim in mind, I will demonstrate in this article that the application of semiotics to the analysis of humour, that has hardly been successful up to now, depends on its epistemological premises. Upon their revision it is possible to somewhat broaden

semiotics methodologically, which would enable us to approach the problematic of humour more efficiently.

It should be emphasized that the article is not concerned with semiotics in general, but only discusses the semiotics of Algirdas Julius Greimas, also known as Paris School semiotics, such as it appears in the works of Greimas and his direct followers. Therefore no attempt at a comprehensive overview of existing semiotic theories of humour will be made. Rather than that, I shall limit myself to drawing a perspective emerging from critical evaluation of certain theoretical viewpoints and make use of only those developments which are, to my knowledge, closest to that perspective. Relying on the premise that, once formulated in Greimas' works, principles of semiotic analysis did not undergo any radical transformations, the works by Greimas himself will be employed when presenting, and I will limit myself only to those premises of semiotics which enable to explicate the fundamental aspects of semiotic approach to humour as made possible by Greimas' theory and attempted by his successors.

The same applies to the conception of humour. What is central to the article is the possibility of providing a semiotic definition of humour on the basis of Greimassian semiotics. A general definition of humour would be too broad and obscure as it would either involve the usage of concepts supposedly belonging to "common knowledge", or turn into a list of specific conceptions of humour. In order to scrutinize the methodological problematics of the Greimassian approach to humour, I will explore the weak points of the existing definitions of humour as well as the reasons behind them and the possible solutions to the issues.

1. The precession of meaning: The narrative mind

Right from the start, the semiotics of Algirdas Julius Greimas was built up as a general theory of meaning. However, when talking about meaning directly, especially when using natural language for this purpose, one encounters the problem that any definition of meaning is inevitably tautological. That is, not only must the term 'meaning' be meaningful itself, but also its definition has to have meaning, and accordingly, one always has to talk about "the meaning of the meaning" and so on *ad infinitum*. But, paradoxically, the indeterminateness of meaning is not a problem for Greimas so far as it is not meaning, but rather the conditions of its manifestation that are talked about: "Man lives in a meaningful world. The problem of meaning does not arise for him, the meaning is here – it penetrates him as obviousness, as a totally natural sense of understanding" (Greimas 1970: 189). Even if meaning hardly – or not at all – yields to articulation, it is anyway recognized as an essential attribute of human existence, while indicating that in our everyday experiences we constantly and inevitably perceive

something as meaningful. Such everyday experiences allowed Greimas to state that “signification is nothing else than transposition of one level of language into another, of one language into another different language, and meaning is nothing else than this possibility of transcoding” (Greimas 1970: 81). So on the one hand, meaning and its experience is established as unquestionable and primary with regard to any articulation and successful communication. On the other hand, it becomes an explicit premise of the semiotic project. The problem consists not in the experience of meaning, but in describing the conditions of that experience.

With this epistemological step Greimas dissociates himself from the solely philosophical problematic of meaning. Once he decides on certain unquestionable axioms, he does not pursue the question of why they are unquestionable; instead, he creates a system implied by a set of such axioms in the hope that it would be vindicated by its efficiency. What matters is not truth, but scientific consistency. However a method based on any chosen epistemology should naturally express the conceptual implications of that choice in a structured manner. Both logical analysis and hermeneutical practises are just ways of perceiving meaning (or examining the possibility of its existence) which presume the conditions characteristic of experience of meaning. For instance, in case of formal logic it would be the experience of absence of contradiction, and in case of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics it would be a belief that a truthful and full-fledged perception can only be that of ourselves. Accordingly, when one explicates the essential traits of Greimas’ project of semiotics, one should be able to see what conditions are necessary for the perception of any object as potentially meaningful.

In this respect, Paris School semiotics is, first of all, meant for articulation of coherence. It is not a tool of interpretation, but rather that of translation into meta-language and it is needed so that a reader could strictly analytically describe the result of a process of reading a text as coherent: “I find [this same] synergy between implicit understanding and explicit explanation on all the levels of the construction of Greimas’s model” (Ricoeur 1990: 115). The “implicit understanding” mentioned by Ricoeur is an identification of a certain formal model of the birth of meaning, the explication of which allows to articulate the signification of text. It is in this context that several important methodological aspects shared by semiotics (and structuralism in general) and phenomenology are fundamental.

(1) Both structuralism (which is in this case represented by Greimassian semiotics) and phenomenology share the same starting point, i.e. an antagonistic relation to psychologism as a form and method of scientific explanation and a hostility to reduction of one science to another. Accordingly, the positive task of science which has got rid of psychologism and causal explanation is the explanation of structural relations.

Therefore, both phenomenology and structuralism start from the fundamental principle of *Gestalt* theory which asserts that every object of consciousness depends

on its field and can be understood only through considering its relational location and context. When describing the whole which is given together with every separate part, Husserl uses the notion of the horizon. In the last paragraphs of the second meditation of *Cartesian Meditations* he delivers an essential insight which is the methodological guide of phenomenological analysis: every object of consciousness necessarily refers to something beside itself, to other interrelated possible objects of consciousness which form a system (Husserl 1982: 54–55). Thus the requirement to conduct a phenomenological reduction, i.e. to bracket preconceptions and knowledge to acquire a critical distance with regard to the phenomena that are being described. In case of structuralism, this manifests itself as an operation of setting strict limits to text, which has become one of the main principles of the European tradition of semiotics. An internally closed system is not only the inseparable relation of the signified and the signifier, but also the unity of the text structure established by the planes of expression and content. An explicit requirement to “frame” a text enables the analysis of its inner structure and, accordingly, the articulation of signification. For instance, for Russian formalists the bracketing of preconceptions becomes an important methodological requirement in struggles against physiological explanations of language or psychological interpretations of literature. Finally, the later branch of structuralism in guise of Greimassian semiotics is characterized by “the principle of text immanence”, i.e. the principle of explaining the text from within and not relying on extra-textual elements (such as the biography or psychology of its author, his or her ideological-social position). Thus, the isolation of the text becomes the fundamental methodological principle, and a semiotician when performing an analysis is behaving as a philosopher in pursuit of a phenomenological description.

(2) According to Husserl, an object is always actually perceived in the background of certain anticipation concerning the possible further course of perception. Before being perceived as an actual manifestation, every object has a status of one of the many possible variants compatible with the content of the intentional relation. In other words, the object is perceived as the same in several possible situations which are compatible with the noematic sense of the act and with the implicit data on the object, data that is dispersed throughout the whole system of intentional relations. It is these possible situations that constitute the horizon of an object, and the possible intentional relations which correlate with them constitute the horizon of the act of perception. It is because of this relation that phenomenological investigation never gets lost in incoherent descriptions, but is always well-organized. So, in phenomenology intentionality is a characteristic of consciousness which enables us to perceive the world as coherent. One can perceive things as phenomena consisting of infinitely many “profiles” only if one performs phenomenological reduction, however it is intentionality of consciousness that forms the noematic (i.e. the one that presupposes the whole) side of the “thing”.

In case of Greimassian semiotics the perception of the coherent whole always happens before the analysis is performed. His conception of meaning as of the possibility of transcoding obviously relies on the coherent whole of the text: “meaning refers not only to what words mean to us, it also is a certain direction, or, philosophically speaking, intentionality and purposefulness” (Greimas 1970: 193). In Ricoeur’s terms, it is to the end of explicating the experience of this purposefulness which manifests itself as coherence of text that the narrative grammar (as one of the most important aspects of early Greimassian semiotics) is made use of. It is obvious that both the conception of transformation (i.e. transition from one state to another; sequence of utterances of state and utterances of doing, which establishes the conception of narrative) and the actantial scheme, which is based upon the (economic) exchange of values, connect the heterogenic discursive level of text on strong basis of logical purposefulness. Such a scheme, which rests on order as the initial starting point and its final restoration as a goal in itself, obviously asserts a certain conception of the world. It is thus the somewhat transcendental perception of coherence that Ricoeur associates with the narrative mind and with the act of understanding.

(3) Finally, it is important to note the importance to Greimas of bodily experience of the natural world, which is structured as language (its perception manifests itself through differences) and which is also characterized by an essential coherence: “[...] a common trait of natural signs is to refer to (*renvoyer*) to other things as well as to themselves“ (Greimas 1970: 228). This statement is a direct reference to Merleau-Ponty who maintains that thinking always reveals a subject in a particular situation of being in the world.

According to Merleau-Ponty (2005: 170), the body is the “place” though which the world is given to us and through which we communicate with it. Accordingly, no explanation is meaningful if it cannot recreate an experienced equivalent of the relations that it formalizes. From a semiotic point of view, this means that in order to understand and describe such essential elements of the narrative grammar as, for example, lack and its elimination, hierarchical relations of actants, differences of objects of value or the polemic structure of actants, it is impossible to rely only on the deductive, speculative reason. All of this already presupposes a former knowledge-understanding what it means to be in the world with humans and among them and what it means to lack, to desire, to satisfy a desire and to fight for the objects of value.

It seems that such an obviously privileged position of experience of everyday world allows us to state that for Greimas it is language that is structured like the experience of the world. It seems that Greimas actually hopes that language (as well as texts) will function as if it is fit to describe a world understood in a certain way, i.e. the world of common sense where coherence and stability, allowing for recognition and successful communication, are in force.

It is here that one can speculatively mark the limits of description as conceived by Greimas. Expectation of coherent unity re-establishes that which structuralism and phenomenology fights against in psychologism and metaphysical thinking. What is fixed in “explicit explanation” depends necessarily on the way of conceptualizing the “implicit understanding” and its “scheme of analysis”. Phenomenologically speaking, the ability to capture and analyse states of consciousness is formed on the basis of the ability to perceive and describe the physical and social objects, i.e. by using analogues of conceptual schemes used for the analysis of phenomena of consciousness that are based on the knowledge of different types of phenomena of reality.

2. Joke organization: A chronological axis

Having defined the epistemological implications of semiotic description, one can more efficiently elucidate the problematic aspects of Greimassian semiotics’ relation to humour. In order to do this, I will evaluate the two most influential attempts at semiotic humour analysis, which were then supplemented by their adherents but which were not changed cardinally. In the broadest sense they can be described as the isotopic model and the model of narrative functions. As indicated by the names, when applying these, one uses the aspects of Greimas’ theory discussed in the previous section.

(1) In the chapter of *Structural Semantics* where isotopies are being discussed, Greimas analyses a pun-based joke:

It is a luxurious and extremely elegant party among the people from high society with selected guests. Two guests go out on a terrace to get some fresh air.

– Oh, – says one of them, content, – isn’t this a great evening? The food is wonderful... and what lovely *toilettes* [=toilets/dresses], aren’t they?

– Oh? – replies the other. – I’m afraid, that I cannot comment on.

– Why not?

– Well, because I haven’t been there! (Greimas 2005[1966]: 70)

The analysis by Greimas consists of two main statements. First, humorous stories are composed of two parts. Second, in the joke there is an opposition or a variation of isotopies, which is masked by a shared term. As these isotopies have to stand in a relation of opposition to one another, it is exactly this that allows us to distinguish these variations of isotopies from rhetoric figures (metaphor, simile, metonymy). In case of the latter ones we also encounter several rivalling planes of meaning. However, in case of metaphor one can talk about the field of attraction of the dominating isotopy, which

guarantees the homogeneity of a polysemous discourse, whereas in case of a pun it is impossible to single out a dominant isotopy as here it is the hierarchical equality that is essential. Therefore, according to Greimas, the comic effect of such texts arises from “revelation of two different isotopies in a narrative which seemed to be homogenous” (Greimas 2005[1966]: 71).

The description of humour as provided by Greimas has several essential weaknesses. Firstly, the concept of isotopy, so widely used in Paris School semiotics, is still ambiguous and not yet well-established, which is why it is often used when talking about different and hardly comparable structural characteristics of a text (Nastopka 2010: 160). It seems that at present the most popular and productive definition of isotopy is the following: “a redundant set of semantic categories which enable the uniform reading” (Greimas 1970: 188). When analysing the pun in *Structural Semantics*, Greimas makes use of a different concept of isotopy based on repetition of *classemes*. However, not only can it be criticized severely by demonstrating that the difference between *semes* and *classemes* as defined in his work is poorly-founded or underdeveloped (see Attardo 1994: 74–75), but also its explanatory potential is obscure in general, as the aforementioned units of meaning later on came to be abandoned (Landowski 2005: 19).

The ultimate solution of this technical problem does not belong to the objectives of the present article. However, it is important to note that, irrespective of the definition of isotopy, its description is performed more or less consciously and it inevitably depends on the selection of the relevant elements of text, which is determined by the preconceived determination. As demonstrated previously, coherence of a text fixated by any of the means of semiotic practises is characteristic not as much of the text itself as of the understanding of that text that already took place: no linguistic formation is coherent in itself, instead it is the reading of the text, guided by intentionality of consciousness, that manages to perform a coherent reading of it. It is because of this that the singling out of dominating isotopies can lead to different interpretations, and that even the most semantically inconsistent text can nevertheless be perceived as meaningful (see Nastopka 2010: 161).

Then, whatever the definition of isotopy, isotopy’s main function is to construct the meaning of the text consistently while making use of the rules of interpretative coherence. As a meaningful text has to have a shared direction as a whole, isotopies are needed as tools which allow to overcome the heterogeneity of the meaning of text elements, i.e. in order to choose the one reading compatible with all the elements of a text. In this respect, repetition of “semantic categories” does not even have to be lexically expressed, and its recognition could not function without application of a certain cultural grid.

However, even thus defined, the specifics of this element of semiotic description does not explain how a “productive” inner inconsistency of a comic text differs from

any “opaque” text the ambivalence of which, under normal circumstances, should be removed and written off as irrelevant (thus to remain beyond the limits of interpretation, “behind the scenes” of a semantic description). In Greimassian semiotics hindrances to coherent reading are removed while still in the state of “implicit understanding”, so when formalizing them, an aspectuality especially important in this case is lost. It is interesting that in order to describe the latter, in this analysis Greimas uses a psychologized vocabulary which is highly uncharacteristic of him: a contradictory isotopy is introduced and “revealed” “unexpectedly”, and homogeneity of the narrative is characterised by “seaming”.

(2) An article from 1966 by Violette Morin, where an analysis of a corpus of jokes based on Greimas’ theory is presented, emphasizes not the coexistence of isotopies in a text, but Greimas’ statement that jokes are composed of several parts. Morin develops the insight further by stating that every joke has a tripartite structure. Every part of this structure is associated with a certain function of the development of a humorous narrative (Morin 1966: 108). Normalization introduces characters and situation (compare with “introductory narrative” above), connection establishes the problem or poses a question (in the story analysed by Greimas it is the part of the dialogue where “a shared term” appears) and disjunction solves the problem comically (the last sentence in the pun analysed by Greimas).

Thus a joke is defined by Morin as a sequence of three narrative functions. But even from this short introduction one can notice that Morin’s functions are in their own way variants of both the narrative functions of Propp and the narrative stages of Greimas which are based on the latter ones. Basically, Morin makes the “dialogue part” of Greimas more detailed and defines the three stages as logically presupposing one another and as actively forming a humorous narrative.

It should be emphasized that these functions do not gain any semantic content and only depict a formal model of text development. Therefore, despite the validity of Morin’s conclusions, one can maintain that they are of a more generic character than she aspired to as they outline a scheme applicable not only to jokes or narrative jokes, but also to any narrative. In this sense, the only difference between “serious” and “humorous” texts is the “comic” resolution which is not explicated by Morin and in which the intuitively perceived trait of the object of analysis is used to explain the object itself: joke are narratives with funny resolutions.

Such conclusions are symptomatic and only once more point to the premises and implications of the semiotic project discussed previously. In the spotlight of attention of semiotics are the structures that are articulated in explicating experience of coherence and that are common to all texts. It is in this respect that comic and non-comic narratives can be constructed according to the same rules, and utterances “Adam ate an apple” and “a cat caught a mouse” can be formalized in the same way: “[...] the

content of actions constantly changes, actors change, but utterance-performance does not change at all as its continuity is warranted by the particular distribution of roles” (Greimas 2005: 227).

Despite the aspects that deserve criticism, both descriptions, nevertheless, contain a shared nucleus (if not properly articulated by the authors) which allows to envisage a way of semiotic approach to humour. At first glance it may seem that Morin and A. J. Greimas locate roots of humour at different levels of text. Greimas associates the comic effect with the semantic structure of a narrative (i.e. with the revelation of a specific relation of isotopies), while Morin refers to the narrative structure of the joke as the condition of humour. However, their considerations may be seen to share two elements: disjunction of [meanings] (compare Morin’s second function and the opposition of isotopies of Greimas) and the linear organization [of the perception of a joke] which is present in both Morin’s sequence of functions and in the five-stage description of a joke analysis by Greimas.

If one joins the two aspects, one can maintain that in case of humorous narratives we encounter two fundamental stages of text perception. In the first stage the first isotopy is established, in the second it is proceeded by the second, opposite isotopy with the help of different types of shared elements. As the organization of the text is linear, and the process of text interpretation is a process of perception, a coherent reading should also be conducted in a linear manner. Introduction of linearity into humour analysis essentially means the requirement to take into account that the elements of a comic text are perceived one after another. It is important that such a linear organization does not necessarily correspond to the relations presupposed by the narrative grammar of the text. The latter have the character of logical presupposition. Yet in the case of a comic effect, the chronological aspect of perception becomes important, as does the process of semiosis, i.e. the process of the emergence of meaning in which the perceiver participates as well and which usually remains unproblematic in the semiotic sense.

3. Articulating the implicit: Humour as a process

The requirement to take into account the reader’s perspective might seem trivial: after all, any text is perceived on the temporal axis. However, various types of research in the field of humour show that humorous texts are characterized by a certain strategy which is aimed at the perceiver in a way that most other literary texts are not. For instance, it has been noted multiple times that the effectiveness of most jokes rests upon the information being revealed in a certain succession and at a certain time for them to have a surprising effect. This is why any attempt to formally describe the mechanisms of humorous texts has to take into account the sequence of their perception.

However, focusing only on the perception without its correlation with the text structures and the conditions which enable it would make it impossible to provide a satisfactory definition of humour. In such a case it would only be possible to state that humorous texts are texts which are perceived as funny when being read in a certain way. In order to state that a humorous text creates a humorous effect by being perceived in a linear way one has to have an intuition about which texts will be funny beforehand. However that would not be a satisfactory definition of humour, only a definition of a way of reading which allows for a humorous text to be perceived as such. This is why it is necessary to take into account not only the structural elements of the organization of humorous texts, which correlate with their perception, but also the various aspects of knowledge and memory, which can influence the perception (e.g. a joke being heard for the first time, knowing the structure of a joke before hearing it etc.).

A detailed listing of the attributes of a humorous text remains beyond the scope of this paper which instead focuses on defining the most important objects and relations which should form the core of semiotic description of humour and considers the need of including the perceiver into the description. In my opinion, these should include not only the structural organization of the text but also the phenomenology of its perception, i.e. the structures of the perceiver and the act of perception.

(1) Most authors (e.g. Freud 1966; Bergson 2005[1901]; Raskin 1979) agree that a crucial structural element of humorous texts is a kind of internal antinomy based on an internal logic characteristic of jokes. Basically, this means that the fictional world of a humorous text functions in accordance with a set of internal rules which are usually left implicit, but which can be explicated by means of inference. This applies not only to exclusively linguistic aspects of the text (the form of expression), but also to the logic of actions and cause–effect relations (the form of content).

This does not mean that “serious” texts are always logically sound and conform to the rules of common sense or laws of physics. However, logical aspects become especially important when defining the nature of the antinomy within humorous texts. This is where the procedure of reading a text coherently becomes crucial. As demonstrated earlier, coherent reading depends on the links between the text elements established by the perceiver. It does not matter if these are links between the phonemes, graphemes, fictitious objects or actions of the characters. What is important is that the successful linking of the elements allows us to establish a model in accordance with which the fictitious world or the text is then expected to develop and function. It is these rules, implied by the text, that constitute a kind of a logical system, even if this system does not coincide with the rules of order of the empirically experienced world.

Hence, when faced with the internal inconsistency of the text (the two possible strategies of reading the joke analysed by Greimas: one in accordance with *public* isotopy

and the other in accordance with *private* isotopy) the reader does not necessarily have to be misled in the non-cooperative sense of “being lied to”. Despite hiding information, humorous texts do not fall under the Gricean category of non-cooperative behaviour which leads to effective communication being impossible. In fact, it is obvious that such humorous texts are “efficient” in communicating a special kind of – i.e. humorous – information. This is why in case of humour it is sufficient for the text not to comply fully with the logic it itself established. Thus, the internal contradiction of such texts has to be a local one.

The requirement to be able to describe such a phenomenon is not new to semiotics. The immanence principle is, basically, the requirement to take a critical distance with respect to common-sense beliefs, as well as to the meanings or links valid in natural language, in order to describe the internal logic of the text elements. There are many description practices, from narrative semiotics to semiotics of passion, designed for doing exactly that. Application of these tools to humorous texts could productively contribute to solving the problem of describing and cataloguing the various mechanisms of internal inconsistency of humorous texts (see Ritchie 2014).

(2) If a “serious” text (even if full of metaphors or simply polysemous) usually complies with coherent reading, humorous texts usually break this mechanism in one way or another. This rule-breaking is directly linked to the competence of the reader, which is manipulated by the structure of humorous texts. However, the status of these rules of coherent reading, as well as the nature of this manipulation, is often ambiguous. These problems could be solved by making use of the distinction between the uttered and the perceived message.

It is clear that no text, especially when being read for the first time, is perceived as a whole at once. However the reader has to presuppose that whole, i.e. he has to construct the text as a “referent of imagination” (Greimas 1995: 80). Moreover, that referent should be flexible and dynamic in order for it to be possible to change in the hermeneutic process. Hence the reader could be described not as a subject with an ontological status, but as a structure of an ideal reader, established by the text itself as an element of a structure of perception, partly dependent on the structure of every particular text, and thus an element which can be legitimately included in the description.

The referent of a text, constructed in the imagination of the reader (to use the term in its Kantian sense), is a hypothesis which has a psycholinguistic reality. For example, Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) have demonstrated that the interpretation of a text is being gradually constructed in the memory of the reader by using a number of cognitive operations (selection/deletion, generalization, construction); the relation between the text and the memory of the reader is also an object of constant inquiry which allows to determine the marked places of the text used for humorous effect (for instance, to

stress the importance of the position of the punch line) (e.g. see Bruche-Schulz 2014). This allows us to draw a few important conclusions. First, apparently, some elements of the text activate certain “schemes” in the imagination of the reader, the semantic extent of which can be different from that of the literary lexical meaning of the text. It is the coordination of these schemes that allows to attain a coherent comprehension of any text. Second, the gradual construction of this “referent of imagination” implies a model of trial and error, and thus allows for manipulation of the interpretation process. Third, the inclusion of the processes of memory in the analysis of humorous texts would explain how the contradictory meanings of the text can be perceived as co-existing, since this aspect is crucial in order for the text to have a humorous effect.

(3) It is intuitively clear that reading, even if it is led by a hypothesis of a coherent whole, always proceeds in a chronological way. For instant, the process of deciphering a sentence proceeds by choosing between various meanings (semes) of its lexical units (lexemes). When a coherent set of variants (i.e. an isotopy) is chosen, it is accepted as the meaning of a sentence. An analogous process takes place with respect to larger text units until all of the units which comprise a text are coherently combined.

Keeping in mind the principles in accordance with which a coherent perception of the text is constructed, it is clear that during the process not only the referential meaning of words, but also the encyclopaedic knowledge, contextual information as well as the previous experience of encounters with similar texts are being activated in the structure of the perceiver. On the one hand, such nature of perception opens the way to erroneous readings of the text (and even for an erroneous perception of the text as humorous). However, at the same time the knowledge of these possible interpretation strategies allows taking advantage of them in order to hide parts of information only to be revealed at the exact time necessary for the humorous effect to take place (see Ritchie 2006). Needless to say, such “knowledge” of the possible strategies of interpretation should by no means be understood as a reference to the author of a humorous text. It is merely a useful metaphor aimed at describing a causal connection between the text structures and the process of their interpretation.

Such a relation between the text and its perceiver allows for a semiotic description, where the text (utterance) and its addressee would be formalized as actants of communication exchanging a modality of *knowledge* which is obtained either directly (as is the case with humour) or by intervention of discursive elements. Depending on the perspective (the one of the addresser or the one of the addressee), this relation can be articulated by the squares depicted in Fig. 1.

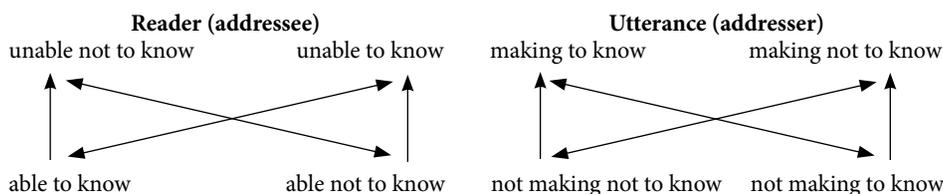


Figure 1. Greimassian analysis of interpretation.

Further, by applying the modalities of veridiction it is possible to state that, by analogy with the cognitive dimension of the discourse, the knowledge can be projected on the addressee from the various possible cognitive positions, namely, *being + appearing*; *not being + not appearing*; *being + not appearing*; *not being + appearing*, thus manipulating the competence of the perceiver of the text (Greimas, Courtés 1979). In other words, in the case of humorous texts it is possible to articulate the relation between the reader and the text as a polemic structure where the reader is interested in achieving coherent knowledge of the text, and the text, in turn, is manipulating the knowledge of the reader to disturb this process. Thus, from a semiotic perspective humour should be defined not as an immanent structure of the text, but rather as an effect of semiosis which takes place as a result of a specific reading of the text that can be formalized. This also calls for a revision of the semiotic definition of meaning. Rather than being defined as a possibility of transcoding (in this case the concepts of meaning and coherence appear to be coextensive if not synonymous), meaning should be perceived as an effect of a relation between the text and its perceiver, which can gain various modalities.

These requirements might seem declarative. However, adopting such a perspective in semiotic studies of humour allows drawing a few important methodological conclusions. First, by defining humour as an effect of the antagonistic structure of a text and its reader, it is possible to clarify the limits of the possible applications of semiotics as well as to evaluate some of the main concepts that are often used without proper reflection. Also, one of the strengths of the proposed analysis of humour is its relative independence from psychological and philosophical fields of humour research. Finally, further research into aspects of text and reader relations could open up a way of studying other reading effects that are currently considered to be mainly psychological and are thus treated as marginal in semiotics.

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Методологические проблемы и перспективы семиотики юмора

Цель статьи – предложить способ определения юмора с помощью семиотики Греймаса и представить юмор как уникальный объект семиотического анализа. На основе текстов Греймаса автор статьи исследует фундаментальные эпистемологические предпосылки семиотического анализа текста и дает критическую оценку существующих попыток семиотического определения юмора посредством связывания их проблематичных аспектов с принадлежностью к имплицитно определенной сфере интересов семиотики. В итоге показывается, что продуктивное семиотическое описание комического текста возможно при пересмотре существующих эпистемологических предпосылок и расширении традиционной области семиотических исследований.

Huumorisemiootika metodoloogilised küsimused ja väljavaated

Artikli eesmärgiks on pakkuda välja võimalus, kuidas tuvastada huumorit Greimase semiootika abil ning kuidas eristada huumorit semiootilise analüüsi ainulaadse objektina. Greimase tekstide najal arutletakse semiootilise tekstianalüüsi fundamentaalsete epistemoloogiliste eelduste üle ja antakse kriitiline hinnang juba olemasolevatele katsetele pakkuda välja semiootiline huumoridefinitsioon, sidudes nende problemaatilisi aspekte implitsiitselt defineeritud semiootilise huviväljaga. Lõpuks näidatakse, et koomilise teksti produktiivselt semiootiline kirjeldamine on võimalik, kui vaadatakse üle *status quo* epistemoloogilised seisukohad ning laiendatakse vastavalt traditsioonilist semiootilise analüüsi välja.