

## FROM MODELLING TO UNTRANSLATABILITY: TRANSLATION AND THE SEMIOTIC RELATION IN Y. LOTMAN'S WORK (1965–1992)

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Though semiotics as a discipline lost its centrality in the humanities some decades ago, Yuri Lotman's semiotics of culture continues to strike us with the multidisciplinary potential of many of its concepts which need yet to be fully understood and developed. Lotman's research interests were so wide that, in addition to the generally used label of "semiotician", he could also well be defined as, for instance, a Pushkin scholar or a literary theorist. However, so far as I know, Lotman has never been defined as a translation scholar, at least not in the common sense of the term, that is as someone who investigates interlinguistic translation processes and their results. Indeed, he has not considered translation from this point of view in his work. Nevertheless, the notion of translation came to occupy an increasingly central place in Lotman's semiotic theory as he moved from the study of modelling systems through the elaboration of the fundamentals of the semiotics of culture and the later theory of the semiosphere. The kind of "translation" he became interested in was not translation between different natural languages, but translation between and within different semiotic systems, a kind of translation that was conceptualized by Lotman on the basis of a loose analogy with translation in the ordinary sense of the word. The last result of this conceptualization will be the idea of translation as a pervasive mechanism of cultural dynamics and human thought. This is definitely one of the outcomes of Lotman's theory, which if adequately understood and developed, could be of particular interest for a better understanding of currently central issues in the humanities such as intercultural relations and conflicts, borders, the centre-periphery dynamic and hybridity.

Translation has not always been at the center of Lotman's theoretical reflection in the field of semiotics, which started and developed in the 60s from other premises and focused on other concepts. In what follows, I will briefly reconstruct the appearance and development of the notion of translation in Yuri Lotman's thought from the middle of the 60s to his last book *Culture and Explosion* (1992). Any periodization of the thought of a scholar is of course a tentative and arbitrary enterprise. This is particularly true for a thinker like Lotman for whom it is correct to say that crucial elements of his later thought are already detectable as scattered observations in his earlier works, while many of the issues that strongly characterize his earlier thought often resurface at some point in his later works. In Lotmanian terms we can speak of an interplay between the center and the periphery of his theoretical attention, where peripheral elements progressively move to a central position, while central ones are relegated to the periphery without being completely discarded. It is, in other words, more a matter of shifts in the dominant of his theoretical thinking rather than of radical turns. Though I will roughly follow in my analysis a chronological line, my remarks will try to group Lotman's ideas around conceptual dominants rather than clear-cut periods of time.

### 1. Relations

The present investigation is based on the idea that the issue of relations can be used as a test to distinguish the different phases of Lotman's thinking on translation. This is not a random choice insofar as relations are, we could argue, *the* central issue of semiotics. If many definitions of the sign circulate today within the field of semiotics, each of them pinpointing this, that or the other aspect of the traditional object of study of the discipline, the common basis of all these definitions lies in the fundamental idea that in order to speak of a 'sign', some kind of relation must be in place: the one is not enough for a sign, we need at least two, or maybe three. The crucial question while establishing the fundamentals of a semiotic theory is therefore: which elements enter into semiotic relation and what kind of relation do these elements obtain? An old tradition of thought, which is perhaps best resumed in modern semiotics by Charles S. Peirce's definition of the sign as something "standing for" something else (see [Peirce 1991: 67–9, 141; Peirce 2003: 106]), understands the semiotic relation as a "representative" relation, making intelligible phenomena that would otherwise remain opaque to knowledge, by positioning their ideal representatives (signs) into an organized structure for representation (a system

of signs). This is of course only one of the possibilities in understanding relations from a semiotic point of view and in Lotman we can find, as we will see, different and more reciprocal ways of understanding the position and function of the constitutive elements of the semiotic relation.

My argument will therefore investigate the increasing centrality of the notion of translation in Lotman's (later) thought, following the shifts between different ways of conceptualizing the semiotic relation and its elements at different stages of Lotman's work. I will show that the focus of Lotman's attention gradually moves from 1) the representative relations between modelling systems and external reality to 2) the hierarchical relation between different kinds of modelling systems to 3) the translational relation between different languages and semiotic systems. The notion of translation enters Lotman's research horizon along with this movement and becomes central in the third stage just mentioned. Insofar as relation always implies the distinction and separation of (at least) two elements and, at the same time, their connection and interaction, it is quite clear why the issue of borders, their establishment and crossing is a constant element of Lotman's reflection on relations and translation. The (in)famous bar separating and connecting the two sides of the sign relation in the long history of (post)structuralist semiotics becomes in Lotman's thought the border which distinguishes and, at the same time, connects semiotic systems making translation possible<sup>1</sup>. Lotman's approach to translation can be defined from this point of view as a "topo-symbolic" approach in which spatial notions and models become the representatives of symbolic relations and communicative interaction.

## 2. From modelling to reflection and transformation: the origins of the Tartu-Moscow School

The central notion in the elaboration of the new semiotic paradigm of the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics in the second half of the 60s has been the notion of "model" or, more precisely, of "modelling system". The notion of model, which has been considered by Thomas A. Sebeok and Marcel Danesi the chief object of study not only for Tartu-Moscow semioticians but for semiotics in general, is a straightforward way of conceptualizing the semiotic relation in representational terms. As Sebeok and Danesi states, modelling can

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<sup>1</sup> I have investigated the relations between the notion of border and translation in Lotman's theory of the semiosphere elsewhere (see: [Monticelli]).

be defined as “the ability to produce forms *to stand for* objects, events, feelings, actions, situations, and ideas perceived to have some meaning, purpose, or useful function” [Sebeok & Danesi: 1]<sup>2</sup>. This definition presents us with the separation of two layers of reality (forms and different kinds of beings) and the establishment between them of a relation of a representative (a “standing for”) and abstractive kind (implying the production of forms) — the meaning, purposes, function of the modelled beings are presupposed, but comes to be fully grasped only within the model itself.

It is interesting to observe that, in an article written in 1967, Lotman describes the relations between the model and its object rather in strongly iconic terms, defining the former as “an analogue of the object of perception that substitutes it in the process of perception” [Lotman 2011: 250]. However, as soon as, in the same article, Lotman comes to define not the model but the modelling system which generates it, discrete elements, their structural relations and rules of combination immediately replace the iconic understanding of the relations between the model and its object: “A *modelling system* is a structure of elements and rules of their combination, existing in a state of fixed analogy to the whole sphere of the object of perception, cognition, or organization. For this reason, a modelling system can be treated as a language” [Ibid.]. The modelling activity therefore establishes a relation between language and the extra-linguistic reality — “perception, cognition or organization” in Lotman’s terms, “objects, events, feelings, actions, situations, and ideas” in Danesi and Sebeok’s terms. “Modelling system” can in this respect be considered the name that Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow semioticians chose as the equivalent to the “systems of signs” that for Saussure constituted the object of the new science of semiology [Saussure: 15–17]. From this point of view, it is interesting to observe that Lotman employs the word “language” as a general synonym for “modelling system”, while Saussure employed “system of sign” as the general term of which (natural) language constitutes one example: “A language is a system of signs expressing ideas, and hence comparable to writing, the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, symbolic rites, forms of politeness, military signals and so on. It is simply the most important of such systems” [Ibid.: 15].

Should we interpret the generalization of the notion of “language” by Lotman in the light of the classical structuralist strategy, which transforms the Saussurean pre-eminence of language among the systems of signs into

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<sup>2</sup> From here on the emphasis in the quoted passage is mine, if not specified otherwise.

a methodological reductionist tool for the researcher that starts to explain all the other systems according to the structure and functioning of (natural) language? I do not think so. In fact, already in this preliminary phase of their thinking, Lotman and Tartu-Moscow semioticians focus their attention not so much on the relation between language (the modelling system) and extra-linguistic reality (the object of the activity of modelling) or the internal structure of language, but rather on the relations between different languages (modelling systems) themselves. These relations are conceived in vertical, hierarchical terms which involve a primary and a secondary system relating as a basis (the primary system) and a superstructure (the secondary system) built upon it: “It is useful to call those systems that have natural language as their basis and accumulate additional superstructures, thus creating second order languages, secondary modelling systems” [Lotman 2011: 250]<sup>3</sup>.

The Saussurean pre-eminence of (natural) language is thus transformed into its primacy in human modelling activities, but what really interest Lotman and Tartu-Moscow semioticians are the relations of language with the secondary modelling systems, as they explain in the first collective volume of the school (1965):

*<...> one of the fundamental issues in the investigation of secondary modelling systems is the determination of their relationship with linguistic structures. It is why it is important to explain what we mean by the notion of 'linguistic structure'. It is indisputable that every sign system (secondary systems included) can be considered as a language. <...> A consequence of this is the conviction that any system of signs can be, in principle, investigated with linguistic methods, and the special role of contemporary linguistics as a methodological discipline. However, from “linguistic methods” in this broad sense, we must distinguish those scientific principles which come from the habit of dealing with natural languages — which are a particular kind of linguistic system. It appears that it is taking this path that makes the search for the peculiarity of secondary modelling systems and the means of studying them possible [ЛОТМАН 1965: 6; my translation. — D. M.]*

This passage shows that Tartu-Moscow semioticians are aware of the fact that the study of secondary modelling systems requires a specific approach and cannot be simply explained according to the structural understanding of natural language (“linguistic methods”). However, they do not yet dispose, at this stage of the research, of the notions needed to understand the relation

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough discussion of secondary modelling systems in the theory of the Tartu-Moscow school see [Monticelli 2016: 432–451].

between modelling systems (languages) in the dynamic, interpretative and transformative terms of a communication process. It is still a matter of representative, abstractive and hierarchical relations, as we see particularly well in the structuralistic understanding of the text that still characterizes Lotman's approach at this stage of his work.

### 2.1. The text as "structure of the work" and "system of relations"

The titles of Lotman's monographs at the beginning of the 70s — *The structure of the artistic text* (1970), "The tasks and methods for the structural analysis of the poetic text" (1972), *Analysis of the poetic text: The structure of poetry* [Лотман 1972] — show his commitment to the structuralist approach to the study of the text. In the terms employed here, this means that the text is also considered the result of a modelling activity that separates it from the external reality. Lotman claims in this respect that the artistic space has a pre-eminent modelling function in the text, stressing the role of the frame, beginning, ends, etc. [Lotman 1977: 209–217], making possible the internal organization of the text as a meaningful structure. As he explains:

the *artistic reality* is graspable when we proceed to *separate the essential*, without which the work would not be itself, from those features which are in some cases important, and nevertheless can be eliminated insofar as by replacing them the *essence of the work* is maintained and the work remains itself <...> *The reality of the text is created by a system of relations — what bears significant (meaning giving, value-making) oppositions, or in other words everything which enters into the structure of the work* [Лотман 1972: 12; my translation. — D. M.].

The relations in places here are 1) the relation between an object (the work) and a single modelling system by which "we proceed to separate the essential", thus revealing "the artistic reality", i. e. the text as "structure of the work" and 2) the system of relations which creates the text and originates from the modelling system which proceeds to transform the work into its structure. This structuralist approach to the text is based on the exclusion of a whole series of other possible relations (all those that are not essential from the point of view of the modelling system adopted). From our point of view, it is important to observe how far we are here from Lotman's later understanding of the text as a polyglot device by which different modelling systems/languages may enter into an interactive relation with transformative results.

However, it is interesting to observe that in the *Structure of the artistic text*, the most systematic synthesis of Lotman's thought at the beginning of the 70s,

the role of the protagonist in the narrative plot is described in terms of events triggered by movements across the borders between spaces described by Lotman as semantically incompatible and differently coded. The protagonist establishes a relation between these spaces by violating the border, which delimits the sphere of action of other minor characters. The event provoked by the crossing of borders introduces some kind of unpredictable novelty into the plot and the situation. This very same idea of the establishment of a relation between incompatible and differently structured semantic spaces as a premise for the emergence of new, unpredictable meanings will resurface as a central tenet of Lotman's understanding of translation in the last phase of his thinking — a chapter of *Culture and Explosion* is, for instance, entitled “Semantic intersection as the explosion of meanings”.

## 2.2. The notion of translation in Lotman's earlier works

If we look for explicit mention of translation in this first phase of Lotman's work, we won't find anything that could point to specific theoretical attention to the notion, though some scattered observations already point in the direction of a broadening of the notion to comprehend the relations between different modelling systems/languages. Thus, while in the *Analysis of the poetic text: The structure of poetry* the few occurrences of the word 'translation' always refer to interlinguistic translation of concrete works and language pairs, in a passage of *The structure of the artistic text* translation is associated with a process of transforming recodification involving different structures:

Although it is difficult to establish the fundamental difference between such types of recoding as the deciphering of content and the translation of a phonic form into a graphic form or translation from one language into another, it is still obvious that *the greater the distance between structures made equivalent to each other in the process of recoding, the greater the disparity in their nature, the richer will be the content of the very act of switching from one system to the other* [Lotman 1977: 36].

The direct proportional relationship between the degree of difference of the systems between which recodification (translation) occurs and the degree of richness of the content emerging from the switching clearly affirmed in this passage will be a central aspect of Lotman's later theory of translation. Another broadened use of the notion of “translation” in the same work refers to the relations between the text (“work of art”) and its object:

Because a work of art is in principle a reflection of the infinite in the finite, of the whole within an episode, it cannot be constructed as the copy of an object in the

forms inherent to it. *It is the reflection of one reality in another, that is, it is always a translation* [Lotman 1977: 210; my emphasis. — D. M.].

The text is understood here not so much in representative terms, but rather iconic ones (a “reflection”) that reminds us of the Lotmanian definition of model quoted above. In this passage, Lotman also implicitly offers a first, tentative definition of translation as “reflection of one reality in another”<sup>4</sup>.

These are all good examples of the presence in Lotman’s earlier works of ideas that will only be fully developed later, within the framework of Lotman’s new theory of translation. Before proceeding to see how this happens, it is worth mentioning that in the article on “The results of the semiotic analysis of art today” [Lotman 1968: 577–585] Lotman described semiotics as “the study of the codification, decifration and transformation of messages” and referred to the issue of automatic translation as a related topic.

Concluding this section, we can claim that, if the research of Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow school in the second half of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s is characterized by the centrality of modelling as the pre-eminent kind of semiotic relation (in the two forms, both hierarchical, of the relation of the modelling system with its object and of the secondary modelling system with the primary modelling system), the issue of an horizontal relation between different modelling systems/languages (“recoding” and “reflection”) and even a broadened use of the notion of “translation” are already present in the works of this period as scattered, marginal remarks.

### 3. Plurality, correlation, polyglotism: Beginnings of the semiotics of culture

The *Theses on the semiotic study of cultures* (1973) can be considered an important signpost for the shift of attention in the conceptualization of the semiotic relation that will bring to the full development of the notion of translation into Lotman’s later thought. The series of articles on the typology of culture published between 1970 and 1973 already contained a few references to translation understood as a broader concept which includes “comparison”, intersemiotic translation [Лотман 1970] and even the modelling activity — Lotman writes there of “translating” the world as a text into an understandable language [Лотман 1973: 227–243]. The *Theses* do not contain many explicit

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the importance of mirror images in Lotman’s work see [Monticelli 2012: 319–339]. Here, I will return on mirror images and their role in translation later on, while discussing enantiomorphism.

references to the notion of translation, but they construct the whole background on the basis of which the new understanding of translation may fully deploy in the following decade.

First of all, in the *Theses*, Tartu-Moscow scholars define the new semiotics of culture as the “study of the fundamental correlation of different sign systems” [Lotman et al.: 53]. This correlation is still understood in many passages of the *Theses* in the terms of modelling and the relations between different modelling systems, but something important changes, as we can observe in the following passage, where secondary modelling systems are defined:

Under secondary modelling systems we understand such semiotic systems, with the aid of which models of the world or its fragments are constructed. These systems are secondary in relation to the primary system of natural language, over which they are built — *directly (the supralinguistic system of literature) or in the shape parallel to it (music, painting)* [Ibid.: 72].

We have here not only the hierarchical relation that we are already acquainted with between the primary and the secondary, but also a horizontal, “parallel” relation between systems. In addition to the “construction upon” (basis-superstructure), we can therefore also speak of the juxtaposition of systems/languages, which are correlated by being side by side (“parallel”). This progressively brings Tartu-Moscow semioticians to a new understanding of inter-linguistic/systemic relations in culture which will constitute the basis for the development of the semiotics of culture and Lotman's later theory of translation. The fundamental definitory passage in this respect can be found under point 6.1.0 of the *Theses*:

For the functioning of culture and accordingly for the substantiation of the necessity of employing comprehensive methods in studying it, this fact is of fundamental significance: that *a single isolated semiotic system, however perfectly it may be organized, cannot constitute a culture — for this we need as a minimal mechanism a pair of correlated semiotic systems. <...> The pursuit of heterogeneity of language is a characteristic feature of culture* [Ibid.: 69–70].

The study of isolated semiotic systems that constituted the structuralistic basis of the theory of modelling systems is thus definitively replaced by the fundamental idea of the “minimal mechanism” as a “pair of correlated semiotic systems”, which will be the central tenet for the development of the semiotics of culture and Lotman's later thought. Later in Lotman's work this “pair” will become an “at least two”, meaning a general index of systemic plurality. This is why, even if Lotman will extensively employ the notion of “binarism”,

Lotmanian binarism cannot be simply reduced to the structuralistic notion of binary oppositions. The Lotmanian “pair” or “binary” refers, on the contrary, to the irreducible ‘plurality’ of systems/languages in culture: “binarism,” argues Lotman, “must be understood as a principle which is realized in plurality” [Lotman 2000: 124]. To this we should add the Lotmanian characterization of the reciprocal relations between the two systems, which is also firstly drafted in the *Theses*, developing the horizontal understanding of the relations between systems/languages (the “parallelism” mentioned above). Thus, contrary to the hierarchical primary-secondary relation, the parallel relation implies reciprocity and interaction between the (at least) two systems/languages which constitute the “minimal mechanism”. The “correlated” systems in culture are moreover described in the *Theses* as “on the one hand equivalent and on the other hand not entirely mutually convertible” [Lotman et al.: 72]. I will return to this later when discussing the notions of ‘enantiomorphism’ and ‘translation of the untranslatable’.

Now, in a typical Lotmanian move, the *Theses* establish an immediate isomorphism between different levels of analysis and the principle of plurality and correlation just described for systems/languages is extended verbatim to texts, whose plurality and correlation become the fundamentals of cultural pluralism that Tartu-Moscow semioticians now define as “polyglottism” or “polyculturality”: “texts transmitted by the given cultural tradition and introduced from the outside always function *side by side* with new texts. This gives each synchronic state of culture the features of *cultural polyglottism*” [Ibid.: 63] and “the assimilation of texts from another culture results in the phenomenon of *polyculturality*” [Ibid.: 68]. We do not simply have static correlation (juxtaposition) here but also a crossing of borders which is, however, not yet characterized in the terms of “translation”, but rather as “transmission” or “assimilation”.

The analytical isomorphism between “correlated languages” and texts existing “side by side” in culture is extended in the *Theses* to any single text which becomes plural in itself, requiring a new kind of theoretical approach:

the view according to which cultural functioning is not achieved within the framework of any one semiotic system (let alone within a level of the system) implies that in order to describe the life of a text in a system of culture or the inner working of the structures which compose it, *it does not suffice to describe the immanent organization of separate levels*. We are faced with the task of *studying the relations between the structures of different levels* [Ibid.: 75].

Notice the important difference of this passage, in which the analysis of the text is a matter of studying the relations between the structures (in the plural) of different levels, from the structuralistic, immanentist and monosystemic understanding of textual analysis expressed in the quote from Lotman's article on the structural analysis of texts discussed above, where the text was studied as a system (in the singular) of relations.

Though translation is not yet a central issue in the *Theses*, the extension of the notion of the "minimal mechanism" as a principle of heterogeneity, plurality, polyglotism, from culture to systems/language(s) to text(s) constitutes a fundamental premise for the analogous extension (we could even say universalization) of the notion of translation in Lotman's later thought. As a last remark, it is worth mentioning that the notion of translation makes its brief but significant appearance at the end of the *Theses*: "translation from one system of text to another always includes a certain element of *untranslatability*" [Lotman et al.: 73]. Translation and untranslatability will constitute the paradoxical, but inseparable conceptual pair that Lotman will employ during the following 20 years to conceptualize cultural dynamics and the generation of new meanings in communication.

#### 4. From modelling to translation: the theory of the semiosphere

In his Introduction to *Culture and Explosion*, Peeter Torop suggests that a "fundamental turn" in Lotman's later thought can be detected in the 1981 article "Cultural Semiotics and the Notion of the Text". In that article, argues Torop, "Lotman replaces the notion of deciphering or decoding the text with the term of 'communication'" [Torop: xxxv]. It is interesting to consider in this respect the new definition of the semiotics of culture suggested by Lotman in that article, which develops the definition of the *Theses* quoted above ("the study of the fundamental correlation of different sign systems"), explicating the "correlation" in the terms of "mutual interaction" "heterogeneity", "polyglotism": "The semiotics of culture is the research area which studies the mutual interaction of semiotic systems with different structures, the internal heterogeneity of semiotic space, the inevitability of cultural and semiotic polyglotism" [Lotman 1981: 3; my translation. — D. M.].

The shift from "deciphering/decoding" to "communication" and from "correlation" to "mutual interaction" is also, I will argue, a decisive shift from "modelling" to "translation" as the central notion in Lotman's attempt to conceptualize the semiotic relation. To understand what is at stake in this shift,

it is interesting to go back two years (1979) before Torop's "turn", when Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky wrote a *Postscriptum* to the *Theses*, which can be considered as a kind of *trait d'union* between the collective manifest of the semiotics of culture and Lotman's semiotics of the 80s:

While *polyglotism* is stressed as a fundamental feature of the internal mechanism of culture, it should be constantly kept in mind that at the basis of any model of culture lies a *binary opposition of two radically different languages, being in a state of mutual untranslatability*. Communication between them takes place with the aid of a *metacultural mechanism that establish a relative equivalence of texts in the two languages* [Lotman, Uspensky: 131].

This "metacultural mechanism" has become "translation" ten years later, when, in the Preface to the *The Universe of the mind*, Lotman sums up the fundamental results of his work in the 80s as follows:

It has been established that a minimally functioning semiotic structure consists of not one artificially isolated language or text in that language, but of a *parallel pair of mutually untranslatable languages which are, however, connected by a 'pulley', which is translation* [Lotman 2000: 2].

We find here *in nuce* the fundamentals of Lotman's later thought that we have already learned to recognize in a preliminary form in the *Theses*, the *Postscriptum* and the 1981 article — the "minimal mechanism", the "parallel pair", "mutual untranslatability" and finally, as a means of "connection" that confers to the whole constellation its dynamics, "translation". However, Lotman will continue in the last phase of his work to employ along with "translation" a series of different synonyms to characterize the connecting "pulley" of the passage just quoted, sometimes making it difficult for readers to follow his argument and recognize the same idea under different names.

Before considering the development of these ideas within the theory of the semiosphere, it is interesting to observe how the turn that the article of 1981 brings about in the general framework of Lotman's thought has to be extended (once again on the basis of the isomorphic principle described above) to Lotman's conception of the text. From an object to be passively modelled by language as it still was at the beginning of the 70s, the text now becomes the place of that plurality and heterogeneity of languages that actively triggers the "transformation" (translation) of messages: "the text does not appear to us as the realization of a message in a single language, but as a complex construction including various codes that is able to transform existing messages and generate new ones" [Лотман 1981: 7; my translation. — D. M.].

#### 4.1. Homogeneity and Heterogeneity in Culture: The semiosphere and the ambivalence of borders and translation

The theory of the semiosphere can be interpreted from our point of view as a point of precipitation in which the ideas slowly and fragmentarily matured in Lotman's reflection since the *Theses* are systematized into a powerful new concept that continues to be based on the spatial imagery that already characterized Lotman's thought at least since *The Structure of the artistic text*. It is therefore not by chance that, in the groundbreaking article "On the semiosphere" (1984), Lotman introduces his new concept by repeating a "refrain" that we know already very well:

It may now be possible to suggest that, in reality, *clear and functionally mono-semantic systems do not exist in isolation*. Their articulation is conditioned by heuristic necessity. Neither, taken individually, is in fact, effective. They function only by being *immersed in a specific semiotic continuum* [Lotman 2005: 206].

The semiosphere is nothing other than the toposymbolic notion used by Lotman to define this "semiotic continuum" which constitutes the conditions of possibility for communication: "Only within such a space is it possible for *communicative processes* and the creation of new information to be realized" [Ibid.: 207]. This brings us to a fundamental characteristic of the semiosphere and central assumption of Lotman's later thought:

And this also lies at the heart of the notion of semiosphere: *the ensemble of semiotic formations precedes* (not heuristically but functionally) *the singular isolated language* and becomes a condition for the existence of the latter. *Without the semiosphere, language not only does not function, it does not exist* [Ibid.: 219].

Polyglotism is therefore not a contingent and derivative situation, but the ontological basis of any semiotic system. This means for us that, in the theory of the semiosphere, translation or at least the need for translation ("the communicative processes" of the passage quoted above) has a pre-eminent role over isolated systems and languages.

Now, given that the semiosphere is a continuum of semiotic systems, it is clear that translation has to be represented (once again with a spatial image) as a movement across this continuum; this is why starting from the article on the semiosphere the issue of translation comes to be inextricably related in Lotman's work with the issue of the borders between different systems, languages, texts, cultures, etc. Drawing and negotiating borders in communication we always implicitly decide on translatability, untranslatability and the destinies of translation. Here are the key passages of the 1984 article in this respect:

“the semiotic border is represented by the sum of *bilingual translating “filters”*, passing through which the text is translated into another language (or languages)” [Lotman 2005: 208–209]; “the border points of the semiosphere may be likened to *sensory receptors*, which *transfer* external stimuli into the language of our nervous system, or a *unit of translation*, which *adapts* the external actor to a given semiotic sphere” [Ibid.: 209]; “The border is a *bilingual mechanism*, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Thus, only with the help of the boundary is the semiosphere able to establish contact with non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces” [Ibid.: 210].

Borders are thus responsible for the regulation of the relations between the internal and the external space, and different kinds of regulation imply different kinds of translation. In the passages quoted above we already find a whole series of metaphors employed by Lotman to characterize this regulation — “filtering”, “passing through”, “transferring”, “adapting”, that also hint to different ways of understanding translation. The establishment of the relation between translation and borders within the semiosphere thus allows Lotman to conceptualize translation as the fundamental mechanism of culture, offering at the same time a new explanation of what he already called in the *Postscriptum* of 1979, the “heterogeneity and the homogeneity of culture”. It is indeed the ambivalence of the borders and the consequent ambivalence of translation which are employed by Lotman to describe and explain in a new comprehensive way the interaction of homogenizing and heterogenizing forces that constitutes the fundamental dynamism of culture.

An analysis of Lotman’s theoretical contributions on the notion of the semiosphere allows us to distinguish between two main functions of the border and consequently two kinds of translation that tend toward, respectively, the homogenization and heterogenization of the semiotic space in which they occur. As I have analyzed this at length elsewhere (see [Monticelli 2009: 327–348]), in what follows I will sum it up very briefly focusing on the issue of relations which constitutes the *leit motif* of this article.

### Translation as self-description

The border can first of all be considered as a line of demarcation that separates the internal space of a given system — be it a language, a culture or the semiosphere itself — from what is external and extraneous to it. There is a clear contradiction between this imposition of a clear-cut separation and the idea,

described above, of the immersion of each system in the semiotic continuum which makes the very same notion of an "external boundary" problematic [Lotman 2000: 124, 130]. Tartu-Moscow semioticians explain this paradox by already introducing in the *Theses* the idea of an understanding of culture "from its own point of view", which Lotman will later call the 'self-description' of culture. It is according to this point of view that culture "will have the appearance of a certain delimited sphere which is opposed to the phenomena of human history, experience, or activity lying outside it" [Ivanov et al.: 53–77].

This delimitation and self-enclosure is not an originary and essential characteristic of a given semiotic entity (be it a person, a text, a culture, a society, etc.), but the result of self-description which brings about a homogenization of the semiotic space. This is achieved through the centralization and hierarchization of the semiotic space by which one of its languages or systems comes to occupy a central position and starts to function as a metalanguage/-system of self-description [Лотман 1978b: 22–23; Лотман 1978a]. Lotman describes this as "the idealization of a real language" and talks of metalinguistic self-description as "the ideological self-portrait" or the "mythologized image" that a culture or society makes of itself [Лотман 1973; Lotman 2000: 129]. From its privileged position, the metalanguage becomes, in other words, an internal principle of *exhaustive translatability*: inclusion within the internal space implies translatability into the metalanguage of self-description. All that is not translatable becomes illegible, insignificant and is kept outside the border of the internal space [Lotman 2000: 129]. Self-descriptive centralization is in this sense the semiotic mechanism which corresponds to the separating/defensive/individualizing function of the boundary. Translation as the process which regulates the relations between the outside and the inside is imagined here as a homogenizing force that draws a clear line of separation between internal, exhaustive translatability and the external untranslatable: "The function of any border," writes Lotman, "comes down to a limitation of penetration, filtering and the transformative processing of the external to the internal" [Lotman 2005: 210].

#### Translation of the untranslatable

The idealized character of self-descriptive translation is related, as we have seen, to the idealized character of the external border. According to idealizing self-description, which represents culture as a "delimited sphere" the border coincides with a single line of separation. However, in the semiotic reality of the semiospheric continuum, the border should rather be conceived as a multi-dimensional, complex space which Lotman also defines, as we have seen,

a “bilingual mechanism”. From the metasystemic (transcendent) point of view of self-description, the border had the function of *separating* the semiotic space from its outside like a membrane or a filter, which let in only what can be (and has already been) translated into the structuring metalanguage at the center of the internal space. On the contrary, from the point of view of its ‘immanent mechanism’, the border as bilingual space *connects* different semiotic systems and opens them to an inexhaustible interplay across borders.

The movement of homogenizing separation and internalizing individuation I described before is thus counterbalanced within the semiosphere by a movement of connecting openness and heterogenizing communication which correspond to an understanding of translation as border crossing/violation as opposed to border establishment and securing. In his later works, Lotman will often describe this kind of translation employing the oxymoronic image of “translation in cases of untranslatability”. Unlike metastructural, self-descriptive translation, which had to be total and exhaustive, “translation in cases of untranslatability” gives rise to “difficult and inadequate translations” presupposing a fundamental untranslatable residuum which may become the point of departure for always new (similarly “inadequate” but “equally right”) translations [Lotman 1991: 405–6]. The relation that the translation of the untranslatable establishes between differently structured, incompatible systems has, in other words, an heterogenizing impact on any of those systems because it “lets in” those extrasystemic, untranslatable elements that self-descriptive translation filtered out, thus granting the homogeneity of the internal systemic space.

#### Enantiomorphism and dialogue

The final result of Lotman’s understanding of the semiosphere as the space of semiotic relationality, heterogeneity and translation of the untranslatable is the notion of enantiomorphism which specifies the kind of relation that has to obtain between the pair of systems of the minimal mechanism constituting the ontological *sine qua non* of any semiotic relation. If Tartu-Moscow semioticians already described in the *Theses* the “correlated systems” of the “minimal mechanism” as “on the one hand equivalent and on the other hand not entirely mutually convertible”, in the 1984 article Lotman systematizes this idea introducing the notion of “correlative difference” which is understood in terms of an enantiomorphic structure as follows:

The simplest and most widely disseminated form of *combination of a structural identity and difference is enantiomorphism, mirror symmetry*, through which both parts of

the mirror are equal, but unequal through superposition, i. e. relating one to the other as right and left. Such a relationship creates the kind of *correlative difference that is to be distinguished from both identity — rendering dialogue useless — and non-correlative difference — rendering it impossible* [Lotman 2005: 220].

This passage introduces another notion that occupies a central position in Lotman's attempt to reconceptualize the relations between different systems/languages in his later work — the notion of dialogue. My suggestion is to consider Lotmanian "dialogue" a synonymic variation of "translation in cases of untranslatability". In his article "Culture as subject and object of itself" (published in 1989), Lotman characterizes the enantiomorphic relation that occurs between the systems/languages of the minimal mechanism exactly in terms of mutual untranslatability:

the minimal organization includes 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].

This passage helps us to draw a bridge between the different understandings of semiotic relation in the earlier and later periods of Lotman's work: we have here "languages" as models of "extrasemiotic reality" (the modelling systems) and languages in relationship with one another as parts of the "minimal organization" (translation in case of untranslatability).

##### 5. Translation of the untranslatable as a source of unpredictable meanings: (non-)relations and explosions

The final achievements of Lotman's thorough rethinking of the semiotic relation are to be found in his last works — *Culture and explosion* and *The unpredictable workings of culture* — which also represent an opening toward new lines of research that Lotman could unfortunately not pursue in his lifetime. *Culture and Explosion* starts from a rephrasing of the understanding of semiotic relations developed during the 80s. For some reason Lotman now avoids the notion of "semiosphere", but confirms all of its aspects: the idea of the semiotic continuum and the minimal functioning mechanism, enantiomorphism, dialogue/translation in cases of untranslatability. But at the center of Lotman's attention are now the conditions of possibility for the emergence of novelty in culture and historical processes.

The relation between incompatible systems that the translation of the untranslatable makes possible becomes, in this context, the condition of

possibility for the generation of unpredictable meanings, i.e. novelty: “you could say that the translation of the untranslatable may become the carrier of information of the highest value,” states Lotman [Lotman 2009: 6], and “valuable information” should be understood here as new information, because the transformations taking place during the movement from the input to the output of the system are “unpredictable” [Lotman 1997: 9]. Just like in *The structure of the artistic text*, a narrative event was provoked by the protagonist’s violation of the borders between different semantic spaces, the explosion is provoked now by the “semantic intersection” between incompatible systems triggered by the translation of the untranslatable, which can therefore also be understood as a relation of the unrelated or a short circuit bringing together spaces that had to remain separate with unpredictable results.

What is really new in the last works of Lotman is that the spatial imagery we have described so far in all its transformations is employed to gain a new point of access to (historical) time and temporality. The interaction of continuous processes and explosions in history are thus explained in the same terms that Lotman already used to explain the interaction of homogenizing and heterogenizing forces in culture. This is possibly the most interesting and engaging heritage of Lotman’s latest work that has yet to be thought in the light of the latest shifts and turns in the humanities and social sciences.

## Conclusion

This article investigated the introduction and development of the notion of translation in Lotman’s (and, very partially, the Tartu-Moscow school’s) works, focusing on the issue of the semiotic relation — its constitutive elements and the way they interact with one another. If the reflection of Lotman and Tartu-Moscow semioticians started from the notion of modelling and the relation between modelling systems/languages and extralinguistic reality, the fundamental distinction between primary and secondary modelling systems complicated the picture from the very beginning, stressing the plurality of languages of culture and the need to investigate their relations with one another. Initially these inter-linguistic/systemic relations are understood in vertical, hierarchical terms (the “secondary” built upon the “primary”), but they become increasingly horizontal and reciprocal along with the development of the semiotics of culture, which comes to understand culture as the space of human communication in the terms of “cultural polyglotism”, a “system of systems” and, finally, the “semiotic continuum” of the theory of the semiosphere. The

basis for this understanding of semiotic plurality as the ontological ground of culture and human communication is to be found in the notion of "the minimal functioning semiotic mechanism" as an (at least) binary system that means the relation between (at least) two different systems. In his later works, Lotman starts to describe and understand this relation as translation, which at the end of his work acquires the status of universal mechanism of cultural dynamism and human thinking. Notions such as enantiomorphism and translation of the untranslatable are introduced by Lotman at this stage of his reflection to characterize the relations and interactions between the semiotic systems/languages in a space whose constitutive feature is heterogeneity. This space is consequently shaped not only by continuous, regular and predictable processes, but also explosions, discontinuity, the emergence of unpredictable novelty through the contact established in translation between mutually untranslatable systems.

It is tempting to interpret the different phases of Lotman's understanding of the semiotic relation and translation on the background of the changes in the social and cultural context of the Soviet Union of those times. We could see, for instance, in the developments described above, a progressive enlargement of the domains involved in the semiotic relation accompanied by an increase in the complexity of the relation itself which would mirror the progressive loosening of the isolation, opening of the political and cultural borders and increase of internal differentiation in Soviet culture from Khrushchev's Thaw to Gorbachev's Perestroika. At the end of *Culture and Explosion*, Lotman himself briefly hints to the possibility of applying his notions as instruments to conceptualize the social and cultural challenges of those times, particularly "the radical change in relations between Eastern and Western Europe" [Lotman 2009: 174]. However, it is important to remind here, of the non-linearity of Lotman's thought described at the beginning of this article which makes it impossible to match completely the development of Lotman's theory with the parallel line of political and cultural developments in the Soviet Union. We should generally understand the relations between the development of a tradition of thinking and its times not merely in the terms of socio-cultural determinism, but also as a form of reaction, a "strike-back" of theory to the socio-cultural conditions from which it emerges.

It is in this respect interesting to observe that the development of Lotman's thought toward the universalization of the notion of translation in the theory of the semiosphere and the consequent new understanding of cultural and historical processes parallels in many ways the analogous development from monosystemic structuralism to the opening plurality of poststructuralist

thinking in the West (see [Pilshchikov, Trunin: 368–400]). Notwithstanding the different cultural situation and the lack of direct contact, it is striking to observe the analogies, at least in the general direction of the reflection developed by Lotman and authors such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida in the 60s and the 70s.<sup>5</sup>

I think that, being in many respects a product of its times, Lotman's theory of translation continues to offer important ideas and unexplored potentialities for the humanities and social sciences today. If intensively developed and integrated, its conceptual framework may offer a more complex and dynamic understanding of relations, communication and change in culture and society.

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<sup>5</sup> I have considered this elsewhere (see [Monticelli 2016; Monticelli 2012]).

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