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Language-Culture Homology: The Poetics and Semiotics of Culture in a Creative Recovery of a World Model

ABSTRACT

> *Shōnen oiyasuku, gaku narigatashi;*
> *issun no kōin karonzu bekarazu.*
> (*Youth passes swiftly, and learning is difficult to*
> *attain; not a moment's light should be wasted.*)
> Zhu Xi

The habilitation thesis *Language-Culture Homology: The Poetics and Semiotics of Culture in a Creative Recovery of a World Model,* proposed with the view of supervising doctoral candidates, in accordance with the current methodology, is comprised of two parts: **I. Scientific, professional and academic preoccupations** and **II. Perspectives of development of the university (scientific, professional and academic) career**.

I. Scientific, professional and academic preoccupations

Our scientific preoccupations start with the elaboration of the Phd thesis focused on the critical edition of metropolitan Dosoftei's printed work, *The Life and Passage of Saints*, published in Iaşi, between 1682-1689. I chose this Phd subject not only because of a keen interest in ancient Romanian books, but also because of the desire to bring back to the contemporary attention, 315 years after its first publication, a hagiographic text widely regarded as a monument of the ancient Romanian culture.

The *Life and Passage of Saints* was printed in Romanian language and Cyrillic letters, and was published by Dosoftei in four volumes, originally comprising 1000 pages. The first volume depicts the passion of saints that the Orthodox Church celebrates every of the days of September (the beginning of the ecclesiastic year), October, November and December, the second volume includes those of January and February, the third – March, April, May and June, while the last should have covered July and August, but unfortunately could not be finished, as the harsh historical conditions forced the metropolitan to go into exile.

In the critical edition of Dosoftei's work, I used the principle of interpretive phonetic transcription, trying to facilitate the reading for researchers, linguists, philologists. I followed, in this respect, the directions provided by historical Romanian dialectology and by the history of language, also taking into consideration the ortographic and orthoepic norms of contemporary Romanian language.

The critical edition I published at the Echinox Publishing House in 2002 remains to this day the only critical edition of the metropolitan Dosoftei's printed work. **(I.A.1.3.1.)**

The direct, years-long contact with the printed *Life and Passage of Saints* posed many questions regarding the adequate transcription, but it was also challenging, since it triggered

further explorations from the perspective of textual semantics, cultural hermeneutics and semiotics, in the attempt to "decipher" the cultural code and the discourse universe underlining a 17th century hagiographic text. The ever-changing dynamics of reception puts "old" works in the danger of losing their significance, as the text "closes itself" in a symbolic universe which remains specific to a certain epoch. I tried, therefore, to establish a *cultural dialogue*, where memory could achieve the dimension of a creative and constructive process, while the historical traditional matter could be "reinterpreted" in a literary manner. The cultural function of the printed work *Life and Passage of Saints* (*Lives of Saints*), published in Iasi by the metropolitan Dosoftei, can be approached through the functional-typological categories of cultural texts proposed by East-European semiotic theory, while the text itself can be defined as a world model of the "semantic" type, configuring a mythical-symbolical sense. **(I.A.1.2.)**

Assuming that language is both a spiritual phenomenon and a cultural fact historically contingent, in which the speakers from a certain linguistic community shape their traditions into discourse, I always regarded the word, instead of a dead matter, rather as a "spiritual reflection" where the life of speakers can be felt, or as "the developement of a certain tradition", in what concerns a language. Such a dynamics specifically highlights the "interconnection" between the "development" of language and that of culture and civilization. Moreover, since language is a cultural product itself, it evolves just like any other fact of culture, and changes within the language are only "historical objectivizations" of creativity, seen from a cultural perspective. **(I.A.1.1.)**

It is precisely at this point that semiotics of culture comes to the fore. As a branch of general semiotics, this approach underlines the special cultural importance of language, within the various semiosis processes man is able to generate. As a matter of fact, some researchers consider poetic language to be the most characteristic aspect of the language driven process of semiosis.

Its is widely known the fact that the internal organization of a culture mirrors the structural scheme of language. This is why culture itself can function as means of understanding the natural language, whose superstructure it ultimately is. In a final analyis, cultural and linguistic semiotics try to recover the world-vision traced in history by humanity and its spirit. The semiotics of culture can grasp the dominant type of semiosis specific to a certain culture, but it also provides the proper framework to understand and interpret various cultural texts.

In a theoretical framework derived from Eugeniu Coşeriu's integral linguistics and by the special contributions brought within semiotics of culture by the Japanese linguist Yoshihiko Ikegami, I thence focused towards comparative/contrastive studies concerning interjections/ onomatopoeia **(I.A.2.2.1.)** and idiomatic expressions in Romanian and Japanese **(I.A.2.2.2.)**. I argued for the fact that these facts of language are also "acts of linguistic creation" turned into tradition, which can define the "character" of a given language. By using the illustrative material provided by Romanian and Japanese languages, I approached both interjections/onomatopoeia and idiomatic expressions, previously neglected by traditional linguistic research, as particular structures enlightened by the philosophy of language (in case of interjections), respectively complex sintagms (in case of idioms), consisting of a network of lexical and grammatical relations, whose meaning is determined or completed by the cultural context. I further focused upon the way in which interjections/ onomatopoeia, the so-called "mimetic words" or "non-words", as well as idiomatic expressions or the "repeated discourse" construct meanings according to their own norms, different from the free technique, thus proving, probably even more than the lexeme itself, how language is conditioned by "things" and by "knowledge of things".

The semiotic process involving the human being assumes that *something* stands for or replaces *something else*, the use of language being, henceforth, a particular case of semiotic activity. The attempt to understand the semiotics governing natural languages led to deeper research concerning, on the one hand, the language governing rules (*rule-governed aspects*) and, on the other hand, the aspects that change (*rule-changing aspects*) or create rules (*rule-creating aspects*) within the given language. In light of all these considerations, I believe we should forgo the classification of « logical », « alogical » or « illogical » languages, and assume the idea that, in certain languages, a certain code is more or less pre-eminent than others, whereas, in a given language, a function can dominate another, without any assessements of value whatsoever. **(I.A.2.1.)**

The French semiotician Roland Barthes, for instance, identifies the pattern of "emptiness" as a recurring theme in the configuration of the Japanese spiritual universe, an idea that Yoshihiko Ikegami would later reevaluate at the level of cultural semiotics research. The Japanese theorist examines Japanese culture and language as semiotic mechanisms and identifies the same pattern of the "empty centre", not only at the level of various cultural manifestations, as Roland Barthes did, but also at the level of language. The respective pattern can be grasped in the characteristics of Japanese language, which has a strong tendency to vague articulation and strong context dependency. According to Yoshihiko Ikegami, the pattern of the "empty centre" is a "homological structure", inherent to Japanase culture and, implicitly, language.

The notion of "homology" was initially defined by natural sciences as similarity of structure identified in completely different objects or domains, subsequently assuming the existence of a genetic relation, in which A and B are homologous to C and D because they have a common origin. However, the semiotics of culture uses the notion of "homology" rather in the sense of structure, although it seems to still hold the assumption of a genetic relation; after all, culture is eventually based on man's integrating semiotic activity, which gives an extremely significant place to language as a meaning-creating semiotic activity.

In our opinion, language and culture equally function according to a strong semiotic mechanism, so the examination of any given culture can reveal the fact that the world model proposed by a certain spirituality can include a complex hierarchy of codifying structures. Therefore, I consider that the phenomenon of ambiguity manifested in the Japanese language and culture could be regarded as a strong argument for a case of homology, the pattern of the "empty centre" identified by Roland Barthes being only one of its consequences in this respect.

The volume titled *Claire-obscure, Vagueness and Ambiguity ... Hallmarks of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Literature*, published in 2010, hence proposes an interdisciplinary investigation, meant to highlight an essential feature of the Japanese language and culture: ambiguity. **(I.A.2.3.5.)** Starting from the acception of the term "homology", I demonstrated the similarity of structure that can be grasped in both Japanese culture and language, respectively Japanese literature, in terms of ambiguity – the characteristic that defines the Japanese cultural model and, implicitly, the Japanese language and its textual characteristics. The book is structured on three levels, outlining what could be called the possible typologies of ambiguity in Japanese culture, language and literature: *The Ambiguity of the World*, *The Ambiguity of the I"* and *The Ambiguation of Ambiguity*, based on a reading model according to which any kind of exploration, be it linguistic or literary, should start precisely from the Japanese cultural code dominant of ambiguity.

And if language can be seen as a "cultural text", within the variety of linguistic semiosis the human being is capable of, poetic language undoubtedly represents the most typical behavior based on "change/transformation of rules" or "creation of rules". This explains my interest in the Japanese poem *haiku*, which Japanese poetics defines as "the

essence of the language of passion and emotions", or in fundamental narrative texts of modern and contemporary Japanese literature. **(I.A.2.2.3.1 - I.A.2.2.3.4.)**

Approaching the *haiku* through instruments provided by text analysis (coherence, cohesion etc.), I discovered in its features non only the characteristics of Japanese language, bearing the imprint of ambiguity, which consequently makes the poem strongly context-dependent, but also the characteristics of Japanese culture, deeply embedded in the Zen Buddhism philosophy. **(I.A.2.2.3.1.)** Japanese language and culture thus created the favourable background for the emergence of an artistic genre like the *haiku*, the poetic formula whose brevity could ensure formal perfection and whose simplicity could mirror its depth. A double ideal is hence achieved: that of the classical form, which proves artistry by concision, and the romantic one, which gives priority to truth expressed through/by improvisation.

From the same perspective that combines linguistics, poetics and semiotics of culture, I analyzed several narrative texts, trying to underline the fact that stereoscopic mechanisms **(I.A.2.2.3.2.)** or intertextuality as a polyphonic index at Mori Ōgai (1862-1922) **(I.A.2.2.3.3.)**, the search for *the perfect word* at Yasunari Kawabata (1899-1972) **(I.A.2.2.3.5.)** or the metaphoric play of alternative worlds at Haruki Murakami (1949-) **(I.A.2.2.3.4.)** represent "the hard nuclei" of the process of birth and development of the modern and post-modern Japanese novel.

Indeed, in the contemporary world of instantaneous information and electronic communication, one approaching fast new horizons of knowledge, the translation work has become a necessity in itself, according to the maxim: *Transferre necesse est*. In the world of *in-between*, respectively *between* languages, *between* established professions and disciplines, *between* cultures, translation no longer leads to one single destination, namely from a foreign and far-away country to another one, but becomes a dynamic process, which involves in-progress adjustments and constant reorientation towards various partners from cultures that seem, in fact, more and more close in recent years. **(I.A.2.4.1.)**

Defined as a cultural exchange, translation represents the "bridging" of various cultures and the unity of mankind. However, with translations from geographically far languages, when an apparent "hiatus" inevitably emerges between the two cultures, translation finds itself particularly concerned with the problem of connotations. In this case, fidelity can be achieved not only by an "asymptotic" adequacy of the target-text to the source-text, by means of "inventivity" and "creativity", but by a hermeneutic process as well, corresponding to the form and meaning of the text. Most translators consider it enough to account for the vocabulary and the grammar of the source-text and let the final product shape itself in consequence. However, the global meaning of the text cannot be grasped just from the basic significations of words and from relations between sentences, phrases or statements, but recomposed according to the <u>cultural context.</u> The translator is thus first required to comprehend as truthful as possible the thinking and sensibility of the cultures and civilizations whose languages he/she "connects". Without understanding those ultimate, irreducible elements, those atoms of signification singled out within a specific vocabulary through the method of "semantic fields", without accepting the singularity of each culture and civilization that shape and individualize languages, the act of translation is meant to fail in its enterprise. As a consequence of that, translation can be equally seen as a linguistic and a cultural operation, because the text cannot be reduced to its linguistic expression, but has to be placed in a wider cultural context, one the translator should render visible through an act of creativity. All in all, meaning is not given, but has to be constructed and created, in close connection to the spirit of every language, to the culture of every people. I tried to follow this principle in all the four translations of literary texts I published until now. **(I.A.2.2.4.2.)**

However, not only translation can go beyond cultural borders, but also the poetic art promoted by the so-called "new poetry" from the second half of the 20th century, a phenomenon also known as *concrete poetry* or *visual poetry*. **(I.A.2.2.5.)** A form of internationalizing poetic means of expression and communication, the "verbivocovisual" genre emerges as a theoretical model that redefines the in-set ways of text production and reception, and proposes instead an expressive-experiential model that widens information about the materiality of language. By analyzing some examples of visual poems (in Portuguese, French and Japanese), I tried to point out that two apparently extremely different cultural universes, which use an arbitrary-sign (the Occident) or a pictorial-significational writing (the Far East), could actually meet somewhere beyond linguistic barriers, through the formula of *visual poetry*, whose poetics could eventually lead to a "common universal poetry", semiotically governed by innovative rules. My research was based on an interdisciplinary perspective combining the semantic-linguistic method with cultural semiotics and history of art and resulted in defining the model of the world proposed by visual poetry through the recurrent pattern of the *line in movement*.

If we admit the fact that everything is endowed with a meaning, then any object, poem or calligraphic exercice eventually becomes a cultural text that can be understood only by *an adequate reading*. Undoubtedly, there are many common features between Japanese calligraphy and the Byzantine icon, both of which are visual and verbal images **(I.A.3.1.)**. They reject the principle of representation of the visible structure of the world, only to turn into privileged ways and spiritual-metaphysical means of revealing the absolute. Both "spiritual paintings" or "sacred images", epiphanies of a world hidden behind a shroud of mystery and of mystical communion, Japanese calligraphy and the Byzantine icon are prone to a perpetual re-discovery. However, on the other hand, an extremely challenging question would be whether the global meaning of these two iconographic arts, approached from the perspective of hermeneutics and cultural semiotics, could be revealed instantaneously or gradually, as an intuitive perception of the icon-replaced reality.

My personal exhibitions of Japanese calligraphy, displayed both in Japan and in Romania, followed closely *the path* of a single art, located at the junction between painting, in a generic sense, and writing. Moreover, my studies concerning Japanese calligraphy tried to point out the singurality of this art and to analyze its specific features with the instruments of cultural semiotics. **(I.A.3.2.)**

I should also point out the fact that I mentioned all known citations or mentions of my work from various specialty texts, relevant for the given scientific and artistic course within the habilitation thesis.

In what concerns my professional achievements **(I.B.)**, I already referred (1.) the didactic component of my profession, by presenting the university courses and textbooks I published, (2.) the research topics financed by various grants, (3.) and my scientific contribution in the field, illustrated by studies published, participations and/or organizations of different scientific and/or cultural events. **(I.B.1.-3.)** In the final part of this subchapter, I presented my contributions in organizing student performance activities. **(I.B.4.)**

In what concerns academic management activities **(I.C.)**, I mentioned the priorities I set for the proper functioning of the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures that I currently lead.

II. Perspectives of development of the university (scientific, professional, academic) career

The second part of my habilitation thesis underlines the continuity of my previous direction of research, illustrated by the volume I am currently working on (*Rethorics, aesthetics and culture: Yasunari Kawabata*), which explores the fictional universe of the

Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata's (1899-1972) narrative. **(II.A.1.)** The already outlined perspective of research situated between linguistics/ poetics and semiotics of culture is used to analyze the way in which, through innovative narrative devices, Yasunari Kawabata tries to shape an aesthetic philosophy where the word, placed in a new architecture, could trigger new symbols and significations.

Another domain of interest I pursued in recent years concerns the Japanese advertising discourse; it could be called generically "From *Nihonjinron* to *Kawaiiron*" **(II.A.2.)**, and it makes use of the same methods of poetics and cultural semiotics. Being a type of discourse based on persuasive communication, advertising tries, among others, to build on concepts turned into "blind spots" of the globalized contemporary age, such as those of "national identity" and "Japanese". This phenomenon could, in fact, be compared to a trend that began during the Meiji epoch (1868-1912) and reached its climax in the 70s and 80s, the so-called *Nihonjinron* or "the debate upon *Japaneseness*". The discourse about "Japaneseness" (*Nihonjinron*) developed through an entire century, trying to define the concepts of "Japanese" and "Japan" somehow from an atemporal perspective. However, the contemporary age, filled with fast changes, crises and reorientations, turned to a discourse about Japanese "cuteness" (*Kawaiiron*), where the terms "Japanese" and "Japan" are, probably too often, linked to the adjective "kawaii" (cute).

The extremely interesting results of my previous research could be summed up under the following titles:
* Culture "self-modelling" and ideological resonance: complicity of e*thos* and *pathos* in the Japanese advertising discourse
* Argument for "glocalization": *Japan for the world* in the Japanese food advertising message
* Cultural and national identity: *mythologizing* artifact in the Japanese mass-media.

Within the subchapter "Professional perspectives" **(II.B.)**, at the component of the Japanese language teaching, I also mention the elaboration of an university course titled: *Idiomatic expressions as vehicles of cultural meaning in Romanian and Japanese*, meant to provide students in *Japanese language and literature* with a better understanding of Japanese culture starting from the facts of language. **(II.B.1.)** In addition to that, I underline the priorities I set in order to further ensure the organization of student performance activities. **(II.B.2.)**

In the final part, concerning "Perspectives of academic management" **(II.C.)**, I pointed out my view upon the evolution and perspectives of development of the *Department of Asian Languages and Literatures*, in quality of its director, and of the Program of *Japanese Language and Literature*, in quality of coordinator.