

Jakobson on Peirce

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"Any concept is a sign, of course. But we may take a sign in so broad a sense that the interpretant of it is not a thought, but an action or experience, or we may even so enlarge the meaning of sign that its interpretant is a mere quality of feeling".

C.S. Peirce

It was in the early fifties that the name of Charles Sanders Peirce began to appear in the writings of Roman Jakobson. First the reference was to Peirce's pioneering draft of semiotics and marginally to his notion of "interpretant" (Jakobson 1953:1.555;1.565-66), but gradually it extended to such diversified notions as the triadic classification of signs into icons, indices and symbols, translational theory of linguistic meaning, universe of discourse, inner dialogue, and temporal interpretation of sign classes. By that time, however, Jakobson's theorizing had reached its final phase: he had already accomplished most of his major contributions to general linguistics, substantially shifting the main pillars of the Saussurean paradigm; his renowned means-ends models of language was also in the process of completion, a model that was to account for the facts and findings he had accumulated over half a century (cf. Jakobson 1953;2.557;1956).

It is tempting to ask, therefore, what could have prompted Jakobson to cite Peirce so often. If it was not simple to embellish his erudite prose, what was the ultimate purpose of Jakobson's repeated recommendations? Was he just intent on acquainting the linguistic world with the semiotic thought of this creative and sometimes unfathomable precursor, or was he trying to reinforce some aspect of his own theoretical standpoint, as in the case of his inordinate emphasis on the contributions of Mikolaj Kruszewski or on Gerard Manley Hopkins?

Some of Jakobson's motives are attested by his own words. For years Jakobson had been chafing under the deplorable situation that he was "among linguists perhaps the sole student of Peirce's views" when "many things could have been understood earlier and more clearly if one had really known Peirce's landmarks" (Jakobson 1980:34). If it had been Jakobson's intention to make these landmarks known, no one can now doubt that Jakobson proved to be marvelously successful in this respect. Peirce, an unhappy and obscure philosopher known only among the interested few, has now come to be the most frequently discussed and the most often cited writer in semiotic literature. But the question still remains what theoretical conjunction it was that induced Jakobson to think so highly of Peirce.

It is instantly noticeable that the adduced observations center around the nature of signs in general and of signification in particular. This is quite understandable because, before anything, Peirce was the father of present-day semiotics and semiotics in its proper sense was the domain that preoccupied Jakobson in his later years. Perhaps the following list will exhaust the assertions in Peirce's semiotics that Jakobson thought worthwhile to bring to our renewed attention:

- 1) The Stoic tradition in Peirce which conceives of the signum as a referral from the signans to the signatum.
- 2) The inclusiveness of his semiotic program, especially the trichotomy of signs that includes various modes of significative phenomena.
- 3) Relative hierarchy among the modes of signification that enables us to speak of various hybrid forms in signs, or in Peirce's terminology "degenerate signs".
- 4) The elucidation of the generic character of both signans and signatum in the code of language.
- 5) His concept of "interpretant" which regards meaning as the translation of a sign into a more developed sign or into another system of signs.
- 6) His observations on the modes of being of the three basic types of signs.
- 7) General affinities of thought as exemplified in such concepts as dyad and invariance.
- 8) His emphasis on the importance of blanks and inner dialogue for the study of language.

This is an itemized list of Peircean themes that recur in Jakobson's writings. Even this brief enumeration will enable us to say something cogent about the tilt that Jakobson gave to Peirce's phenomenology. But let us first address the hub of the whole cluster of ideas, namely, the three-modal classification of signs. Doubtless this is one of the most popular and the most important facts of Peirce's semiotic theory. But the deeper reason for Jakobson's expounding this trichotomous program must be sought elsewhere, presumably in his general attitude towards the Saussurean paradigm. Jakobson always used to gauge his accomplishments in relation to Saussure's basic assumptions-- or, speaking more bluntly, his tactics used to be to challenge Saussurean tenets one by one. Characteristically, however, the first principle of

Saussurean linguistics-- the arbitrary nature of the [linguistic] signs-- remained uncontested.

For Jakobson, who started as a translational poet, the motivated, or even significative, nature of "the alphabet" was something that required no theoretical corroboration. It was sufficient for him simply to quote "a telling criticism" of the principle by one of his revered colleagues that only for a detached onlooker is the "bond between the signans and signatum a mere contingency, whereas for the native user of the same language this relation is a necessity" (Jakobson 1965:2.348; cf also 1962:1.653). According to textual and other evidence, Saussure's query into the arbitrariness of linguistic signs was quite thoroughgoing, spanning both the relation between signans and signatum and the relation between signum (that is, the unity of signans and signatum) and designatum, turning in consequence the whole argument into a devastating critique of human language (Engler 1962; Maruyama 1983: 184ff.). Even when Saussure envisaged the possibility of a general science of signs embracing such diversified systems as writing military and maritime signals, gestures, the language of deaf-mutes, costumes and ceremonies, he conceived of it as basically concerning arbitrarily fixable values. But this aspect of Saussurean linguistics had no appeal whatsoever to Jakobson. He was much more interested in tracking down, in the Genevan master's epistles and old notes, fragmentary observations relating to a category of signs which is "not always completely arbitrary" (Jakobson 1980a), and in his turn continued to amass wide-ranging evidence of the necessary or natural nexus between the signans and signatum. Yet it is easily imaginable that Jakobson felt a compelling need to elaborate a more inclusive theory that adequately accounted for every aspect of verbal signs in their varying degrees of motivation-- a need which should have become all the more strongly felt, or even a theoretically prerequisite, when confronted with the actual task of mapping out plans for general semiotics. Quite understandably, he saw that the two intertwined principles in Saussure of the arbitrariness of the signs and the static conception of the system "blocked the development of the *semiologie generale* that the master had foreseen and hoped for" (Ibid.).

In this context, the doctrine of signs that Peirce had outlined saved perfectly both of Jakobson's his needs: it provided Jakobson with a cogent and well-developed framework for semiotics as well as with a more flexible approach to language. The first and direct application of Peirce's trichotomy to linguistic signs is attempted in Jakobson's "Quest for the Essence of Language" (1965), in which he addresses himself to the "far from unanimous" principle of arbitrariness from the angle of how verbal code and messages are motivated. From the outset, Jakobson does not regard Peirce's semiotic classification as something fixed and closed, and repeatedly praises "his shrewd recognition that the difference between the three basic classes

of signs is merely a difference in relative hierarchy " and further comments that " it is not the presence of absence of similarity or contiguity between the signans and signatum, not the purely factual or purely imputed, habitual connection between the two constituents, which underlies the division of signs into icons, indices and symbols, but merely the predominance of one of these factors over the others." (1965:2.349)

Here we find the three important motifs that shape Jakobson's later model of semiotic theory - the bonding between signans and signatum, a pair of binary features, namely, similarity/contiguity and factual/ imputed, and the relative hierarchy in the modes of possible motivation which, incidentally, is one of the characteristic traits of his functional approach. Although the final theory-formation is yet to come, and although it appears so paradoxical, there is good reason to believe that, well before Jakobson came up with all these theoretical premisses, he had already in view the conclusion that derives from the theory. Two years earlier, in a treatise on visual and auditory signs, Jakobson writes:

Using C.S Peirce's division of signs into indexes, icons, and symbols, one may say that for the interpreter an index is associated with its objects by a factual existential contiguity and an icon by a factual similarity, whereas there is no existential connection between symbols and the objects they refer to. A symbol acts by virtue of law.' (Jakobson 1963:2.335)

At this stage, the binary opposition factual/imputed is still unformulated except for the disconnected references to factual contiguity and to the conventional nature of arbitrary symbols. But we cannot overlook the fact that here for the first time Jakobson enumerates the three categories in an inverted order (instead of Peirce's original "icons, indexes and symbols" or their exact reversal) (cf.1957:2.132). The deviation becomes all the more striking in "Quest for the Essence of Language" (1965) because the two versions appear side by side between the quoting and the quoted passages:

Peirce's concern with the different ranks of coassistance of the three functions in all three types of signs, and in particular his scrupulous attentions to the indexical and iconic components of verbal symbols, is intimately linked with his thesis that the most perfect of signs are those in which the iconic, indicative, and symbolic characters are blended as equally as possible (2.349 [Apparent misprints corrected by KIY])

Although the above -cited passages do not entirely preclude alternative interpretations, there is at least a surface indication that somehow index comes foremost in Jakobson's mind. And we can surmise that his emphasis on the modal varieties of signs, their relative hierarchy, and on the underlying pairs of binary oppositions all reflect a decade of his theorizing endeavours which culminated in a *revision* of Peircean trichotomy. But before pursuing this development of Jakobson's thought, we must take a brief look at Peirce's phenomenological edifice that enclosed and defines his taxonomy on each level.

Peirce conceived of his phenomenology as a catalogue of universal categories for the being in general. What underlies all his intricate system of taxonomy are the three classes of the model of being which he termed firstness, secondness and thirdness-- or, in a more transparent terminology, possibility, existent and law, respectively. According to one of his most straightforward statements, firstness is defined as "something which is what it is without reference to anything else within it or without it, regardless of all force and of all reason." (Peirce 2.85) It is a quality of unanalyzed feeling, or a mere appearance with "an utter absence of binarity." Secondness, on the other hand, is "the mode of being of that which is such as it is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third.... The type of an idea of secondness is the experience of effort, prescinded from the idea of purpose' (Hardwick ed., 1977:24-25). Thirdness is "the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other" (Ibid). If these three are exhaustive modes of being that our conscious mind registers, it is quite easy to see that signs are typically triadic relations in which "something stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (2.228). The following passage brings forth almost all the facets of Peirce's semiotic thought and methodology:

A Sign is anything which is related to a Second thing, its Object, in respect to a Quality, in such a way as to bring a Third thing, its Interpretant, into relation to the same Object, and that in such a way as to bring a Fourth into relation to that Object in the same form, ad infinitum. If the series is broken off, the Sign, in so far, falls short of the perfect significant character. It is not necessary that the Interpretant should actually exist. A being in futuro will suffice. Signs have two degrees of Degeneracy. A Sign degenerate in the lesser degree, is an ... Index, which is a Sign whose significance of its Object is due to its having a genuine Relation to that Object, irrespective of the Interpretant. Such, for example, is the exclamation "Hi !" as indicative of present danger, or a rap at the door as indicative of a visitor. A Sign degenerate in the greater degree is an... Icon, which is a Sign whose significant

virtue is due simply to its Quality. Such for example, are imaginations of how I would act under certain circumstances, as showing me how another man would be likely to act. We say that the portrait of a person we have not seen is convincing. So far as, on the ground merely of what I see in it, I am led to form an idea of the person it represents, it is an Icon. But, in fact, it is not a pure Icon, because I am greatly influenced by knowing that it is an effect, through the artist, caused by the original's appearance, and is thus in a genuine Obsistent relation to that original. Besides, I know that portraits have but the slightest resemblance to their originals, except in certain conventional respects, and after a conventional scale of values, etc. A genuine Sign is a... Symbol, which is a sign which owes its significant virtue to a character which can only be realized by the aid of its Interpretant. An utterance of Speech is an example. If the sounds were originally in part iconic, in part indexical, those characters have long since lost their importance. The words only stands for the objects they do, and signify the qualities they do, because they will determine, in the mind of the auditor, corresponding signs. (2.92)

Here a sign is conceived of as a relation that is infinitely regressive because the mediating factor, the interpretant, is also a sign to itself. The ultimate semiotic correlate, however, is necessarily triadic, irreducible neither to a dyad nor to an unembodied quality. Thus thirdness is an inherent and defining character of semiosis. Still, we must not overlook an important and very abstruse aspect of Peirce's theory, namely, that the three model classes do not constitute a cut and dried scheme of labels but are so stipulated as to be recursively applicable and the second and the third cycles of the same classificatory principle produce the well-known threefold trichotomies of signs. They can be first classified according to the mode of being of the sign itself, according to the relation between the sign and its object, and according to the sign in its relation with the interpretant.

	Firstness	Secondness	Thirdness
First	Qualisign	Icon	Rheme
Second	Sinsign	Index	Dicisign
Third	Legisign	Symbol	Argument

In order to grasp the whole nature of these trichotomies, we must first clarify why only disjointed parts of this taxonomy could have been the major concern of semiotic students, including Jakobson himself: above all, sinsign and legisign in their more transparent and popularized version of "token" and "type" (cf. Hardwick ed. 1977:83) and the tripartite classification of semiosis according to its secondness. Apparently the answer lies in the inclusiveness of the scheme itself. Qualisign, for instance, is characterized by Peirce as a quality which "cannot actually act as a sign until it is embodied" and the embodiment of which "has nothing to do with its character as a sign" (2.244). In other words, it is simply a qualitative possibility unrealized and therefore uncoded, something whose mode of being could be inferred "only by a proper way of abstraction" (Yonemori 1981:140).

The third column, on the other hand, concerns the nature of interpretant construed as modes of statement: emotional, dynamical and logical, respectively. We notice a general parallelism with "the traditional model of language... confined to the three functions; emotional, conative, and referential (Jakobson 1960: 3.24), yet Jakobson's attitude towards this trichotomy is quite obscure, as he makes little mention of it anywhere. The point is that these categories represent three different aspects of "that which is essentially intelligible" (2.309) rather than the difference in functional motivation in verbal manifestations. Rheme is a possible assertion, a blank form of proposition yet to be implemented with significative forms. Dicisign is an indexical proposition which is "either true or false, but does not directly furnish reasons for being so" (2.310) and, in consequence, the argument is, "a sign whose interpretant represents its object as being an ulterior sign through a law, namely the law that the passage from all such premises to such conclusions tends to the truth". (2.263)

Taken as a whole, Peirce's semiotic program encompasses ontology, grammar and logic in their broadest forms, and it is quite understandable that the more practically minded semioticians, especially those with a linguistic background, should focus only on those aspects of this program which show affinities and near correlatives with their own concepts and terminology. But Peirce's formidable exercise in classification does not end here. Actually, the three trichotomies do not even constitute a classification of signs at all but offer merely a preliminary identification of semiotic invariants of three categories that "together define ten classes of signs" (2.254) which in turn further subdivide into sixty-six subclasses. It will be futile to go into all the details here. Nevertheless, the logic of classification cannot be dismissed so easily since it comprised the very essence of Peirce's whole project.

As Jakobson has repeatedly pointed out, Peirce "did not at all shut signs up in one of these classes" (1980:38) but thought rather that every actual sign has all the three categories blended together. Consequently, classification of signs for Peirce

amounts to identifying possible combinations of classes between thirdness, secondness and firstness. Mathematical enumeration produces twenty-seven combinations, but Peirce places two strong theoretical restrictions on them:

(1) No sign must be combined with other sign(s) on the same column.

(2) No sign can combine with the next lower sign on its right column.
(2.236n; Feibleman 1946:88; Yonemori 1981:128)

The necessity of these restrictions is again based on the fundamental character of the three categories: any combination within the same category nullifies the meaning of categorization itself and allowing the lower category to determine the higher one runs counter to the initial premise that the thirdness of "genuine mediation is the character of a sign" (2.92). It would not be entirely superfluous to point out that the "symbolic icon," or the symbol with "an icon and/or an index incorporated into it," to which Jakobson used to refer (cf. 1968:1.702; 1980: 38, etc), is theoretically precluded in Peirce's later formulation. In consequence, the triadic relations that make up signs are (rhematic, iconic) Qualisign, (rhematic) Iconic Legisign, Rhematic Symbol (legisign), Argument (symbolic, legisign), (rhematic) Iconic Sinsign, Rhematic Indexical Legisign, Dicent Symbol (legisign), Rhematic Indexical Sinsign, Dicent Indexical Legisign, and Dicent (indexical) Sinsign. Peirce further enumerates degenerate varieties for these ten classes, which mainly relate to the manners of reference (direct or indirect) and in case where the third correlate is a legisign to the manners of inference (deductive, inductive, or abductive). But this brief sketch would suffice for our present purpose of examining Jakobson's reaction to Peirce's program.

These, then, are the basic lines of semiotics that Peirce drafted around the turn of this century (circa 1906, according to the editor of his collected papers). But as we have indicated, Jakobson did not just draw attention to this pioneering legacy. Even though it is true that, owing to the fragmentary and confused editorship of the available texts of Peirce's writings, "the reader is obliged to rework assiduously for himself the whole plan of these volumes in order to get a perspective" (Jakobson 1980:33), Jakobson's interpretation from the first gravitates towards those aspects of Peircean theory that corroborate or tie in with the basic lines of his own theoretical stance: the allegedly structuralist method in Peircean phenomenology, the non-Saussurean or motivationist vista that his semiotics opened up, his emphasis on dyads, and the like. In a word, Jakobson was "a selective reader," as Bruss (1978) aptly put it.

And finally, after a decade since his first acquaintance with the American thinker, comes the following summing-up. In 1968 Jakobson writes:

The division of signs into indexes, icons, and symbols, which was first advanced by Peirce in his famous paper of 1897 and elaborated throughout his life, is actually based on two substantial dichotomies. One of them is the difference between contiguity and similarity. The indexical relation between signans and signatum consists in their factual, existential contiguity. The forefinger pointing at a certain object is a typical index. The iconic relation between the signans and signatum is, in Peirce terms, "a mere community in some quality," a relative likeness sensed as such by the interpreter, e.g a picture recognized as a landscape by the spectator. We preserve the name symbol used by Peirce for the third class of signs.... In contradistinction to the factual contiguity between the car pointed at and the direction of the forefinger's pointing gesture, and to the factual resemblance between this car and an etching or diagram of it, no factual proximity is required between the noun car and the vehicle so named. In this sign the signans is tied to its signatum "regardless of any factual connection". The contiguity between the two constituent sides of the symbol "may be termed an imputed quality, "according to Peirce's felicitous expression.....

The classification of relations between signans and signatum posited three basic types: factual contiguity, imputed contiguity, and factual similarity. However, the interplay of the two dichotomies- contiguity/similarity and factual/imputed admits a fourth variety, namely, imputed similarity. Precisely this combination becomes apparent in musical semiosis. The introversive semiosis is a message which signifies itself, is indissolubly linked with the esthetic function of sign systems and dominates not only music but also glossolalic poetry and non-representational painting and sculpture. (Jacobson 1968:2.700;2.704)

While the terminology is mostly Peirce's, it is completely deprived of its original theoretical framework. Jakobson disregards the three fundamental categories by adhering to Peirce's earlier, possibly the earliest, formulation, rejects the second trichotomy itself in favour of an entirely new tetrad, and resorts to functional cross-classification rather than to the triadic componential definition. Bruss (1978) enumerates Jakobson's deviation from Peirce's original formulation regarding all the major theoretical constituents such as sign situation, object, the three subclasses themselves. Evidently this is no longer an advertisement for Peirce, not even a garbled version of Peircean semiotics, but- an -out and out statement of Jakobson's own standpoint, which must, therefore, be approached as such and evaluated in its own right.

There are at least three points of general theoretical interest:

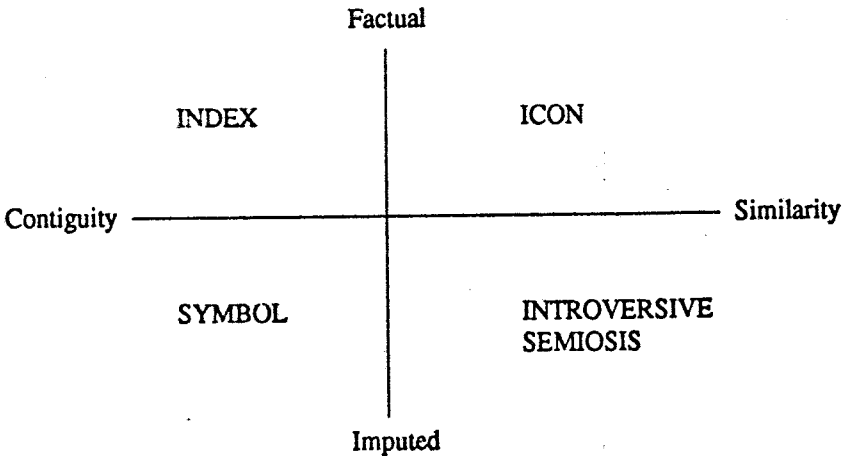
- (1) Why does indexicality come foremost in the Jakobsonian classification of sign?
- (2) Does his reformulation have the same theoretical scope as Peirce's?
- (3) What will be the justification for Jakobson's alternative outline of semiotics?

Apparently, Peirce's semiotic program as can be glimpsed in his *Collected Papers*, covers several developmental stages, and Jakobson was free to put together a highly personal version of his own distillation. Regrettably, Jakobson's program, in its turn, is not mapped out in all its details. His 1978 survey of language in relation to other communication systems comes closest to being complete, but other sources have to be also taken into consideration if we are to assess the significance and the possible consequences of the Jakobsonian modification.

To begin with, we can note a confrontation between the two scholars' different scientific backgrounds-- naturally fraught with numerous faux amis-- which led, in Jakobson's hands, to a serious distortion of meaning with regard to several important terms. Jakobson had evidently more of a practical mind and approached the problem of signs with several concrete semiotic systems in view. This is presumably one of the reasons why he chose to disregard the first trichotomy of Qualisign, Sinsign, and Legisign. If Peirce classifies signs according to whether "the sign in itself is a mere quality, is an actual existent, or is a general law" (Peirce 2.243), Jakobson's classification of actual, embodied signs can dispense with these ontological categories of signs.

In talking about the verbal code, Jakobson used to take "the verbalizable" into account, but somehow made no attempt in his semiotics to reconcile the Peircean notion of possible signs with his own. Instead, the first trichotomy is replaced with much a more detailed cross classification according to (1) the modes of perception (visual/auditory), (2) the ways of production (organic/instrumental), (3) the modes of presentation (representative/ostensive), (4) the modes of existence of the addresser (communicational/informational), and, finally, (5) the modes of use (autonomous/applied) (Jakobson 2.702-703). Compared to Peirce's schema, this offhand enumeration is evidently much more realistic. Yet this reshuffling commits Jakobson to a tacit understanding that signs are all existents to be perceived either visually or auditorily and that they span both communication and information. This classification is, by today's standards, much too anthropomorphic. In fact, it marks the first step in Jakobson's departure from the phenomenological framework of Peirce's semiotics.

In Peirce's second trichotomy, signs as such stand for something else in three different capacities depending on their relation with designate, or in Peirce's terminology, with their objects. And this scheme also undergoes a drastic modification that takes us back to our initial question why index comes first in Jakobson's classification. In short, Jakobson seems to assert that all the (human) signs can be adequately placed within the following diagram:



If the signs are a function of the two polarities, there would be no special reason to favour any particular order in enumerating these four subtypes. As we have seen, however, Jakobson chooses to give priority to factual contiguity, that is, to index rather than to icon or symbol. It is understandable why factuality (*Sachlichkeit*, in his earliest formulation) comes first, as it is clearly meant to identify the least "developed" mode of representation. Nonetheless, we are hard put to understand why contiguity precedes similarity in that the latter apparently implies less motivation between the sign and its object.

The only possible answer seems to be to suppose that Jakobson's classification is ineluctably logocentric. In language, shifters, and in particular demonstrative pronouns with a gestural prop, moor the conventional edifice of language-- in effect, a complex system of superordination and predication --to the real world. Iconic elements in language, on the other hand, are either phonic qualities subservient to meaning or else present a facultative homology between events and propositions, which can occur in language, as Peirce put it, only in degenerate form.

Beside producing a forcible transmutation of trichotomy into binarism, possibly with a logocentric orientation, this classification has several other important implications. Most notably, it characterizes sign - types by gradience rather than

by pigeon-holing and thus induces, by means of cross-classification, an entirely new type of signification termed "introversive semiosis". George Steiner was probably the first commentator to call attention to this type of signs that "seek to establish reference only to themselves, only inwards" (Steiner 1961), yet Jakobson goes a step further by giving this typology a theoretical framework. Taken literally, the defining terms, such as "imputed similarity," for instance, appear almost vacuous when applied to musical semiosis and glossolalic poetry (what does it mean to say they have imputed similarity with their objects when the objects themselves are nonexistent?), but make sense if we posit that they simply identify the extreme cases of autotelic or reflexive function in music and non representational arts.

If this is the end product of the theoretical encounter in question, we have to say that although Jakobson has done a great deal to stimulate a new interest in Peircean semiotics, advocating the later's pioneering accomplishment was not Jakobson's sole, or even main, objective. It is true that some of Peirce's penetrating observations won Jakobson's deep admiration, but more important was evidently the fact that the temporary symbiosis made it possible for Jakobson to organize his own ideas and insights in such a way as to set up a new paradigm entirely free from the Saussurean anathema. Jakobson's formulation of introversive semiosis may not be quite successful, yet anyone familiar with his theory or arts, especially with the acclaimed definition of the aesthetic or poetic function, will feel that Jakobson's theoretical and interpretive endeavors have been a long preparation for it. In other words, the above schema is so conceived as to both summarize and encompass, on the semiotic level, all of Jakobson's diversified probings into the structure of language and other adjacent sign systems.

It is undoubtedly to Jakobson's credit that semiotics extended its scope over economical, psychological and biological messages and assumed a more explicitly heuristic bent. Still, as we have seen, the project resulted in pulverizing the foundation of Peirce's phenomenological architecture. The same fate, however, seems to have awaited Jakobson's own program: although he tried to set a boundary between semiotics and communication sciences and considered "the totality of communication disciplines" ethnological and zoological, to be the outermost concentric circle circumscribing the semiotic science at large (2.662; Holenstein 1975:190), this program already bears today, when semiotics is broaching ever new subjects in accordance with the expanding intellectual universe of contemporary science, the marks of its own time.

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