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Umberto Eco and Juri M. Lotman on Communication and Cognition

“Often, when faced with an unknown phenomenon, we react by approximation: we seek that scrap of content, already present in our encyclopaedia, which for better or worse seems to account for the new fact” (Kant and the Platypus, 1999: 57).

“While it can be maintained that semiotic processes are involved in the recognition of the known, because it is precisely a matter of relating sense data to a (conceptual and semantic) model, the problem, which has been debated for a long time now, is to what extent a semiotic process plays a part in the understanding of an unknown phenomenon. (Kant and the Platypus, 1999: 60).

Introduction

One of the main tasks of the semiotician is to compare and translate between models. This paper aims to provide a comparative analysis of two different models: Umberto Eco’s model of the semantics of everyday empirical concepts – as conceived in *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* (1999) – and Juri Lotman’s communication model – as theorized in *Culture and Explosion* (2009).

One may argue that Eco and Lotman, although they both established the ground for semiotics as a contemporary discipline and both published influential works in the field of the semiotics of culture, have quite different perspectives and they have very little in common. Eco’s introduction to Juri Lotman’s *Universe of the mind* is one of the few occasions in which one author officially comments on the other’s work (Eco 1990). To be sure, *Kant and the Platypus* does not have any explicit reference to *Culture and Explosion* and Lotman is cited by Eco only once during the introduction of his book (Eco 1999: 5). Thus, at a first glance the theoretical positions of the two scholars are distant. To put it very bluntly, Lotman is mainly concerned with cultural communication and the logic of explosion in culture, whereas Eco’s focus is on perception and cognition as semiotic processes. It is clear, then, that the two scholars write from very different theoretical perspectives and have quite different aims. Nonetheless, when conceptualizing the issue of “lingual communication” (Lotman 2009: 5), both Juri Lotman and Umberto Eco formulated two models that may be considered as similar (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

![Figure 1: J. Lotman’s model of communication (Lotman 1999: 5).](image1)

![Figure 2: U. Eco’s zone of common competence (Eco 1999: 177).](image2)

In a way, both models postulate the existence of an area of common competence that establishes the ground for lingual communication. This is quite a generic claim and it must be said that the idea of an intermediate area as the space of effective communication is not a new one. As Lotman (2009: 4) mentioned in *Culture and Explosion*, the idea of “community” and “sharing” is actually embedded in the etymology of the word communication, derived from the Latin word *communitas*.

One important question that is common to both perspectives is the following: how does change occur in culture? In this respect, the underlying question that moves the two books of Eco and Lotman is similar, yet the strategies employed to answer this crucial question are different. Lotman is concerned with evolution in cultural semiospheres explaining its two basic manifestations, namely, continuity (defined as premeditated predictability) and explosion. Eco, on the other hand, albeit is not directly concerned with cultural evolution, does take into consideration unpredictable trajectories that have changed the path of human understanding and history opening up space for explosion, as for instance, the case of the platypus, a puzzling animal that undergoes a series of erroneous cat-
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The use of language in the formation of concepts is a central theme in psychology and linguistics. Concepts are mental categories that organize information and enable us to make sense of the world. They are fundamental to human cognition, allowing us to classify and remember a vast amount of information efficiently.

Concepts are often represented as mental constructs that help us understand and interact with the environment. They are not just abstract entities but are closely tied to our experiences and the way we perceive the world. Concepts are often taught in schools and learned from interactions with others.

The study of concepts is essential in understanding how people think and communicate. It helps us to understand how language and thought are interrelated, and how concepts are formed and used to express ideas.

In conclusion, the use of language in the formation of concepts is a complex and fascinating process. It is an area of active research in psychology and linguistics, and understanding concepts is crucial for our ability to make sense of the world around us.
Julian Lomax’s Communication Model

Of expression, Lomax (1990) describes a process in which the core of a language is the function of a receiver in deciding on the meaning of a communication. The key idea here is that it is not just the words that convey meaning, but the context in which they are used. The model suggests that the meaning of a message is determined by the interaction between the sender and the receiver. The receiver’s understanding of the message is influenced by their own experiences and cultural background, which can affect how they interpret the message. The model emphasizes the importance of considering the cultural context in which communication takes place.

A key aspect of Lomax’s model is the role of the sender in shaping the message. The sender’s intention is central to the process of communication, as it sets the tone and provides context for the message. The model also highlights the importance of feedback in the communication process, as the receiver’s response provides the sender with information about how effectively the message was communicated.

In summary, Lomax’s Communication Model offers a framework for understanding how communication occurs between individuals. It recognizes the complexity of the process and highlights the importance of considering the cultural context and the role of the sender in shaping the message. The model is particularly useful for those working in fields that require effective communication, such as education, business, and healthcare.

[Note: This text is a simplified explanation of Lomax’s Communication Model. For a more detailed explanation, please refer to the original source.]
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Umberto Eco in His Own Words