

On the concept of “ostension”: a survey of contemporary semiotics

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Abstract. This paper dwells on the concept of ostension and it seeks to provide a critical overview of the main perspectives on this notion developed within semiotics. Roman Jakobson, Umberto Eco and Ivo Osolsobě are among those leading figures that drew attention to semiosis by ostension. Yet, this concept has deeper roots in western thought as shown, for instance, by St. Augustine’s treatise *De Magistro* where ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ are thought of as two ways of acquiring knowledge. This work is an attempt to disentangle what the previously mentioned authors thought about ostension and to pinpoint its relevance for semiotics.

Keywords: ostension; ostensive communication; ostensive signs; non-signs; Ivo Osolsobě

Introduction: Origin of the concept of “ostension”

This paper aims to provide a critical overview of how the concept of ostension is used within semiotics by reviewing the main definitions, models and theories available in semiotic literature. Showing, exhibiting and displaying are among the most natural and common forms of communication; ostension is the act through which such a mode of communicating takes place. Anyone who has had to face a communicative situation in a foreign country whose language is unknown, has experienced that one of the first and most effective strategies to make themselves understood is to convey the meaning of a word by showing its denotata.

Ostension, in its etymological sense, derives from the Latin *ostendo*, *ostendere*, literally means ‘to show’ and it may take various forms. Its pervasiveness in everyday life is undeniable: we point the finger to show to somebody else the meaning of a word by the ostension of its referent; we buy and consume goods and products that are often displayed in shops’ windows; we engage with artworks displayed in galleries, shows and exhibitions as part of our cultural consumption.

Indeed, the concept is often used with different nuances of meaning depending on different contexts, disciplines and academic traditions. 'Ostensive', 'ostensive definition', 'ostensive sign', 'ostensive communication' or simply 'ostension' are recursive terms in the debate on this concept.

Generally speaking, however, at least two different semantic classes can be singled out:

1. *Ostensive definition*;
2. *Ostension*.

'Ostension' and 'ostensive definition' are sometimes used interchangeably, although the former – thought of as a mode of sign production after Eco's publication of his *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975) – is mainly used in semiotics, whereas the latter finds its place in logic and philosophy of language.

The notion of ostensive definition stems from the tradition of logical positivism and it was first introduced by William Ernest Johnson in his *Logic* in 1921, theorised by Bertrand Russell (1948), then adopted by Quine (1960; 1963 [1953]; 1969) and discussed at length by Wittgenstein (2001 [1922]; 1986 [1953]). Let us recall some explications of (i) 'ostensive definition' and (ii) 'ostensive', as found in dictionaries of philosophy:

(i) *Ostensive definition*:

- (1) "An ostensive definition proceeds by simply pointing to something or showing actual examples of the thing being defined, as we usually do when we teach a child. For example, we point to a house and say, 'The word house means this'" (Bunnin, Yu 2004: 503).
- (2) "Definition by an example in which the referent is specified by pointing or showing in some way" (Audi 1999: 247).
- (3) "A definition that proceeds by ostension, or in other words by simply showing what is intended, as one might ostensively define a shade such as magenta, or the taste of a pineapple, by actually exhibiting an example. It relies on the hearer's uptake in understanding which feature is intended, and how broadly the example may be taken. A direct ostension is a showing of the object or feature intended, whilst in deferred ostension one shows one thing in order to direct attention to another, e.g. when showing a photograph to indicate a person, or a thermometer to indicate the temperature" (Blackburn 1996: 331).

(ii) *Ostensive*:

- (1) "(Lat. ostendere, to show) Property of a concept or predicate by virtue of which it refers to and is clarified by reference to its instances" (Runes 2010: 222).

In the present study we leave out the concept of ostensive definition as used in logic¹ and limit our enquiry to the concept of ostension in semiotics. For this purpose, a preliminary outlook of the authors that have devoted a special attention to such a concept will be provided.²

The debate on the concept of ostension in semiotics

Showing has an inextricable connection with explicating and learning. Linguists, philosophers of language and semioticians have drawn attention to the fundamental role played by ostension in language acquisition and some authors aptly emphasize the need to resort to such a form of communication in the absence of a common language. Umberto Eco (1975: 225, emphasis in original), for instance, stresses that “ostension represents the most elementary act of *active* signification and it is the one used in the first instance by two people who do not share the same language”. In the same vein, Juri M. Lotman (1976: 4) remarks: “when dealing with people speaking a language which we do not understand, we resort to iconic signs and illustrations”. Iconic signs (sometimes also termed by the author as “pictorial” signs) (Lotman 1976: 7), as compared to conventional signs, possess a higher degree of comprehensibility and, among this class of signs, Lotman includes the case of “goods *displayed* in a door window (the goods, in this case, play the role of signs)” (Lotman 1976: 5, emphasis mine), which is a good example of ostension.

In this section we locate the concept of ostension within semiotics. Considering the scope and the context of our survey, we shall, first of all, list some of the main definitions of the concept as described in handbooks and encyclopaedic dictionaries of semiotics:

- (1) “Ostension is the action of showing, exhibiting, displaying, presenting” (Sebeok 1986: 656).
- (2) “The mode of semiosis by showing an object or event vicariously for a class of referents” (Nöth 1995: 365). Winfried Nöth, in his *Handbook of Semiotics* (1995), treated ostension and indexicality in tandem and he relies on Umberto Eco’s definition of ostension as theorised in the

¹ The literature on the concept of ostensive definition is quite extensive. Some of the authors that have dealt with this concept are Kamlah and Lorenzen (1967), Kotarbińska (1960), Lorenz (1970). For one of the most recent studies on ostensive definition in logic and philosophy of language see Engelland (2014).

² In addition to this short excursus on the history of the concept of ostension, it ought to be noted that this notion is fruitfully used in folkloristics where it has found a wide application. Within folkloristics, ostension is defined as the presentation of a legend text. Presentation in this respect becomes the counterpart of representation and the legend text instead of being represented via narration or storytelling is shown through ostension. For this trend in folkloristics, see Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983) and Dégh (1995).

Trattato di semiotica generale (1975). Moreover, Nöth distinguished “the act of showing, which is an index, and the object shown, which is an icon of the referent” (Nöth 1995: 365).

Schmid (2008) has dealt with “theatrical ostension” and provided an historical overview of the concept. Ivo Osolsobě (1979c: 74–75) has compiled a selected bibliography on this concept. Ostension has also extensively been used in the field of theatrical semiotics (Elam 1980: 26; Pavis 1980) and the semiotics of media (Sutton 1997). Recently, a novel application was proposed within the semiotics of law (Klusoňová 2012).

In semiotic scholarship we find reference both to “ostensive signs” (Farassino 1972; Eco 1980 [1973]) and to “ostensive communication”, as exemplified by Jurgen Ruesch:

Codification at the interpersonal level is accessible to observation and experimentation. In its simplest form, a person may point to a thing, an organ, or an action and let it speak for itself. This process may be referred to as ostensive communication. Next in complexity are the action symbols, which can vary from universally understood gestures from highly individualized forms of expression. Finally we have the spoken or written word, mathematics, and all other types of essentially verbal forms of codification (Ruesch 1972: 73–74).

Roman Jakobson, Umberto Eco and Ivo Osolsobě are among those leading figures that drew attention to the semiosis by ostension³. Yet, the roots of this concept are usually traced back to St. Augustine’s *De Magistro*. As T. A. Sebeok (1986: 657) remarked, “the first theory of showing comes from St. Augustine”.

De Magistro – penned in 389 in the form of a dialogue between St. Augustine and his son Adeodatus – raises a question of no less importance for the purposes of our study: is it entirely possible to transcend signs in order to signify something? Are signs an insurmountable necessity in the process of the acquisition and transmission of knowledge or can we do away with them? The dialogue focuses on the ability to teach something without signs, using gestures or actions and specifically addresses the relationship between the sign (*signum*) and the thing (*res*).

St. Augustine envisages three different typologies that specify the relationship *signum-res* (De Magistro 4.7):

- (i) relationship between two signs;
- (ii) relationship between sign and the thing signified;
- (iii) relationship between things themselves, without the mediation of signs.

³ The authors and works cited in the present study are not arranged in a chronological exposition, but will rather follow a thematic thread. After Augustine, we will be reviewing to the work of Roman Jakobson, Ivo Osolsobě and Umberto Eco.

The third case will concern us more closely here, as it considers a direct ostension of an object or an action without the mediation of any sign, as is clearly illustrated by the example of the bird catcher:

Suppose someone ignorant of how birds are deceived by twigs and birdlime should meet a birdcatcher equipped with his instruments but merely travelling and not actually engaged in his work. Suppose he followed the birdcatcher step by step and wonderingly thought and inquired what could be the purpose of the man's equipment. Suppose he followed the birdcatcher step by step and wonderingly thought and enquired what could be the purpose of the man's equipment. Suppose the birdcatcher, seeing him all attention, and eager to display his skill got ready his twigs and tubes and hawk and caught a bird, would he not teach the spectator by the action itself and without any signs? (*De Magistro* 10.32)⁴

The subject of ostension, as we shall soon see, already problematised in St. Augustine will find applications also in contemporary authors.

Roman Jakobson: ostension as semiotic display of ready-made objects

Jakobson's references to the concept of ostension are scattered in several articles. He did not have his own theory of ostension but, as we shall see, he borrowed this concept from I. Osolsobě. Nonetheless Jakobson underscored the importance of such a concept for semiotics. In his early writings, for instance, in his disquisition about the specificity of cinema as a semiotic system, he pointed out a difference that is of high relevance for the topic at hand:

What kind of material does this art transform? The creator of Soviet film, Lev Kulesov correctly states that it is real things that serve as cinematographic material. [...] But on the other hand, signs are the material of every art. [...] Is there a conflict between these two theses? According to one of them film operates with things; according to the other, with signs. [...] The incompatibility of the two above-mentioned theses was actually eliminated already by St. Augustine. This great thinker of the fifth century, who aptly distinguished between the object meant (*res*) and the sign (*signum*), taught that beside signs whose essential task is to signify something, there exist objects that may be used in the function of signs. It is precisely things (visual and auditory), transformed into signs that are the specific material of cinematic art. (Jakobson 1981 [1933]: 732–733)

⁴ References are given in the translation of John H. S. Burleigh, *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (1953).

Roman Jakobson aptly reminds us that, while discussing ostension, a more fundamental category ought to be taken into account, that is, the distinction between *signum* and *res* that was outlined by St. Augustine.

Ostension reoccurs in his discussion about the classification of signs. Among the many valuable insights envisaged in the *Selected Writings*, Jakobson stresses the importance of developing sign typologies. Although he never addressed this issue in a very systematic fashion, on several occasions, Jakobson (1971 [1968]: 699) expressed the necessity to cope with problems of sign typologies. He qualified the various criteria according to which signs can be grouped in the following way⁵ (Gramigna 2014: 169):

1. Type of *semiosis* (or the relation between *signans* and *signatum*);
2. Sign perception (or the nature of the *signans*);
3. Structuration according to time or space;
4. Sign production;
5. Signs ad hoc produced *vs* ostension;
6. Pure and applied semiotic structures;
7. Homogeneous and syncretic formations;
8. Various relations between the addresser and the addressee;
9. Intentionality (intended *vs* unintended signs);
10. Relation between the verbal pattern and other types of signs.

We have treated Jakobson’s typology of signs elsewhere (Gramigna 2014), therefore in what follows we shall dwell exclusively on criteria (4) and (5).⁶

Signs can be grouped according to the nature of their production (4). Jakobson (1971 [1968]: 701) distinguished between “directly organic and instrumental” signs and, by coupling the principle of the nature of the *signans* with the criterion of the way of sign production, he singled out the following classification as a result of the juxtaposition of the two criteria. He distinguished between “organic visual signs”, such as gestures, that are “directly produced by bodily organs”, and instrumental visual signs, such as painting and sculptures, that instead resort to an instrument in order to be produced (Jakobson 1971 [1968]: 701).

For the purposes of the present work, it suffices to note that, among the many possible sign-divisions, Jakobson underscored one between any organic or instrumental signs, that is, “the signs ad hoc produced by some part of the human body either directly or through the medium of special instruments” and “a semiotic display of ready made objects” (Jakobson 1971 [1968]: 702). Drawing

⁵ It ought to be noted, however, that Jakobson did not list these criteria in any specific order, nor did he outline a classification of signs in a systematic fashion (except for the typology of signs based on criterion of the variable relation between *signans* and *signatum*). Therefore, the order in which I organise the criteria in the list is my own.

⁶ The numbers in parenthesis refer to the ten criteria used for the classification of signs and listed in the section on Jakobson’s sign typologies.

on the study of Ivo Osolsobě, Jakobson referred to the latter class as “ostension” (Jakobson 1971 [1967]: 661; Jakobson, 1971 [1968]: 702; Jakobson, 1985 [1980]: 171). He defined ostension as

the use of things as signs [that] may be illustrated by the exhibition and compositional arrangement of synecdochic samples of shop goods in show windows or by the metaphoric choice of floral tributes, e.g. a bunch of red roses as a sign of love. (Jakobson 1971 [1968]: 702)

We could synoptically map Jakobson’s basic classification of signs – reflecting criteria (4) and (5) – with the Fig. 1.

Jakobson was content to credit Ivo Osolsobě, outlining the existence of ostension as a general category, without delving too deep into such an issue.

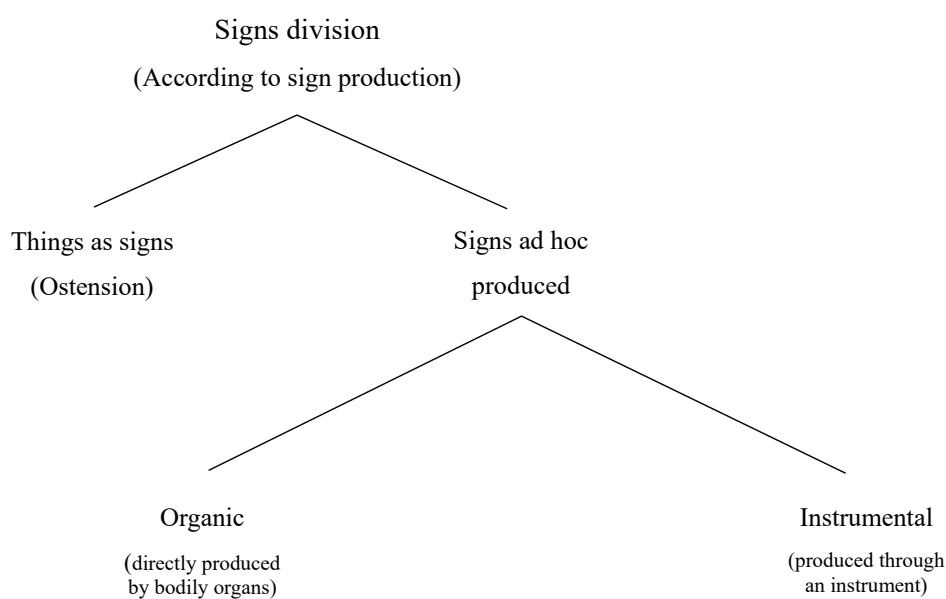


Figure 1. Jakobson’s types of signs according to the way of sign production (adapted from Gramigna 2014).

Ivo Osolsobě and the extrasemiotic status of ostensive communication

Ivo Osolsobě,⁷ Czech dramaturge, theorist of theatre and semiotician, dealt with ostension since the publication in 1967 of his study “Ostension as a limit form of communication”, apparently the first systematic and theoretic analysis of showing as the basic form of human communication (Osolsobě 1979c). He was praised, as we have just seen, by Jakobson, also quoted by Eco (1977: 110) and remembered by Sebeok (1974) for his contribution on this issue. Today Ivo Osolsobě is a forgotten figure in the semiotic debate. Yet, he wrote extensively on the topic at hand and his ideas remain quite original and worth discussing.

Osolsobě’s first use of this term dates back to 1962 and his source was Russell’s ostensive definition. However, he admittedly neglected the earlier coinage by Quine of whose theories he was not aware when he used the term for the first time. Osolsobě’s use of ostension differs from Russell’s ostensive definition as it is remarked in the following passage:

If this is the ostensive definition [that part of our vocabulary that cannot be learnt by verbal definitions and must be defined ostensively, i.e., by showing, or pointing to, their denotata], then the adjective ostensive as used in this connection means accomplished by showing, which is in agreement with etymology, and the term ostension derived from the adjective, also in agreement with etymology, will signify ‘showing’ rather than ‘defining.’ (Osolsobě 1979c: 64)

The embryo of Osolsobě’s theory stems from his engagement with theatre, cybernetics, information theory and general theory of modelling. Many are the references to Ashby, Rosenblueth and Wiener throughout his works. The author often referred to his own approach as an attempt to describe a type of communication *à la* Balnibarbi. The reference is to the famous passage of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* where a rather peculiar reform in the Island of Balnibarbi is portrayed that prohibits the use of words and advises communicating only through things,⁸ so that man would “carry a greater bundle

⁷ Ivo Osolsobě (1928–2012) studied theatre arts and aesthetics at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University and worked as Literary Assistant at the State Theatre in Brno and as a lecturer in Theatre at the University of Brno. His main interests were the theoretical foundation of theatre and semiotics. Since 1971 he was the executive of the International Association for Semiotic Studies and in 1972 he took part in the creation of the Working Group for Semiotics and Mathematical Linguistics at the Czechoslovak Cybernetic Society in Brno. Among his main theoretical contributions in semiotics he published several articles on the theory of ostension and on “ostensive communication” (Osolsobě 1967; 1969; 1971; 1979a; 1979b; 1979c; 1980; 2002).

⁸ “The other project was a scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever. [...] An expedient was therefore offered, that since words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on” (Swift 2005: 172–173).

of *Things* upon his back” (Swift 2005: 172–173, emphasis in original). Sometimes Osolsobě (2002: 363) termed his own theory as “Adeodatean semiotics” with an explicit reference to St. Augustine’s son Adeodatus.

Undoubtedly, Osolsobě was a scholar and a semiotician *sui generis*. According to his self-portrait sketched out in one of his articles, he was, first of all, a man of theatre with a hobby for theory and he admittedly remarked that there were two main sources of inspiration in his life: theatre and semiotics (Osolsobě 1979a: 236). He overtly subscribed to an unorthodox position arguing against the very central concept of semiotics, namely, the sign. His theory does away the notion of sign, substituting it with that of model (Osolsobě 1979b: 546) and therefore it can be thought of as an “anti-semiotics” (Osolsobě 1979c: 68). Viewed through these theoretical lenses, ostension is conceived as having an “extrasemiotic status” (Osolsobě 1979c: 63) and the theory of ostension is spelled out, quite provocatively, as a “theory of non-signs” (Osolsobě 1979c: 68). The following excerpt highlights the paradoxical status of ostension:

Ostension – like any communication whatever – is a form of human cooperation, and human cooperation is inconceivable without language, without signs. However – in case of ostension – all this cooperation in signs and with signs results only in framing and securing of such a communication act in which the proper transfer of information proceeds *without* signs. And this exactly is important, because what we are interested in is the semiotic substance of ostension – which is a non-semiotic substance – and not the problem of its practical feasibility. All signs supporting, accompanying, or even enabling an ostensive act are nothing else but *metacommunication* informing us that something will be, is, or was, shown, whereas the ‘object communication’, that is the ostensive act itself, is purely devoid of signs. (Osolsobě 1979c: 68)

At the heart of Osolsobě’s take on ostension lies the difference between model and original. This difference pertains the use of things in human communication, that is, things can either be employed as themselves or as substitutes for something else. On this note it is worth mentioning one example he provided. Following the teachings of Roman Jakobson, Osolsobě distinguished two approaches – the metonymical and the metaphorical – that are reflected in two ways of operating with originals and models. Let us imagine visiting a place we have never been before. This place is a cave full of stalagmites and stalactites. At the moment of leaving this cavern we will be faced with the problem of signifying an experience no longer directly accessible. This issue has two solutions: (i) using samples or fragments of the stalagmites present in the cavern, that is, physical elements that have a connection with the context of origin; (ii) using substitutes as surrogates for the ‘original’ cave; in other words, using verbal descriptions, pictures, drawings, maps and the like to refer to the cave (Osolsobě 1971: 32). This first

example shows that we can employ things as *pars pro toto*. This is a metonymical approach where a part stands for the whole, traces for their causes, symptoms for their substances, etc. The second approach is metaphorical in as much as there is a comparison of things "irrespective of their context and origin" (Osolsobě 1971: 32). As the author remarked:

When we use the metonymical approach we operate with things (or parts of things) presenting themselves, giving information about themselves or about broader systems to which they belong. On the contrary, when we use the metaphorical approach, we are dealing with things not so much presenting themselves as representing other things, giving information about other things: so we deal with metathings, metaentities. The present state of semiotics, however, does not take account of this fundamental gap, separating signs from "natural signs", indices from icons and symbols, "connotations" from denotation. This gap, which is of fundamental logic-epistemological nature, cannot be bridged; it must be respected. (Osolsobě 1971: 35)

For Osolsobě, things as presenting themselves and things standing for something else are two different logical types. This difference cannot be erased and is overlooked in semiotics. Contemporary semiotic theory suffers from a "cardinal sin", namely, "the mixing together of distinct logical types, different levels of abstraction" (Osolsobě 1971: 32).

Models and originals

Three main elements concur in Osolsobě's theory of ostension: (i) the distinction between "models" and "originals"; (ii) communication is of a different kind and can occur either employing models or originals; (iii) both models and originals partake in the acquisition of knowledge, albeit in different ways.

The premise that grounds Osolsobě's perspective stems from the fact that models are conceptualised in relation with originals. Thus, it is congenial to posit this difference from the outset.

The notion of model is employed in different disciplines, from mathematics to literature. Needless to say, there is not any agreement as to what a model is or should be, nor does there exist a uniform use of the term in different fields of knowledge. Even considering the field of semiotics only, we must come to the conclusion that this concept is used in rather different ways. For instance, when the term appears among the soviet semioticians in the introduction of V. V. Ivanov at the Moscow conference of 1962, models are defined as "forms" reflecting objects, "composed of a finite number of elements". Despite some ambiguous terms such as "forms" and "reflecting", Ivanov's definition follows that of cybernetics:

Like other sciences related to cybernetics, semiotics is concerned primarily with models, i.e. with forms reflecting (modeling) objects, forms composed of a finite number of elements and relations between these elements. The aim is to make these forms (models) in such a way that all the elements and objects which are present (from the pragmatic point of view of the user of a given model), in the modeled object are also present in the form (model), while the converse need not occur. (Ivanov 1962 [1978]: 201)

From the above-mentioned passage it can be inferred that modeling activity entails a relationship between a *model* and a *modeled object*. Viewed under this perspective, a model is thought of as a *model of something*. This something is what goes under Osolsobě's quite idiosyncratic terminology and is labelled as an "original". The many references to Ashby's cybernetics we find in Osolsobě's work prove that his concept of model is deeply rooted in cybernetics.

Osolsobě strived towards a unified theory of models and signs: this was his ultimate theoretical ambition. In his view both signs and models have their own syntactics, semantics and pragmatics and every sign can be described in terms of a theory of models. This does not entail that all signs are models, but it follows that all signs can be described either as models or as originals (or as parts of originals – fragments of originals, traces of originals, etc.). Moreover, both models and originals partake in communication, that is, communication can occur either through the use of models or via originals. The use of models or the use of originals can also be thought of as two different modalities of acquisition of knowledge, namely, direct knowledge and indirect knowledge (Osolsobě 1979a: 238).

In order to fully grasp Osolsobě's position another premise is in order, that is the conceptualisation of communication in terms of sharing. According to the Czech scholar, and in line with many other thinkers (Lotman 2009), sharing is thought of as the *conditio sine qua non* for communicating, although such sharing needs to not be full in order to avoid redundancy in communication: in order to be able to communicate something, our universes must be different in some respect (Osolsobě 1979b: 558). Osolsobě's dream was to put forth a taxonomy of epistemic situations that would account for the criteria briefly described above. He termed this project as "the algebra of epistemic situations" (Osolsobě 1979c: 71).

Osolsobě's unorthodoxy is reflected in his approach to communication that, contrary to the well-known Shannon model, envisaged a model that starts from the receiver instead of the sender.

Osolsobě's point of departure is the situation of the "present original". The minimal and elementary situation of information entails two entities, the original (O) and the receiver (R), and it occurs when the receiver has the original at his cognitive disposal (Fig. 2):

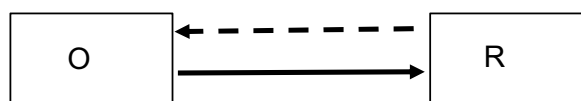


Figure 2. The situation of the present original or direct experience (adapted from Osolsobě 1979b).

The minimal and ideal communicative situation envisaged by Osolsobě encompasses only two elements: the receiver and the original. This is what is referred to above as the 'situation of the original present'. From this situation he builds up his theory and constructs other possibilities. The author distinguished four cases that further specify the situation of the original present. From this elementary and idyllic situation, Osolsobě's reconstructs various partial variants. For the sake of brevity, however, we shall mention them only in passing and instead focus on the opposite situation termed as "the situation of the absent original" (Osolsobě 1979c: 71). The four variations that further specify the minimal communicative situation are the following:

- (i) Situation of the shared original (this situation entails that the same original is at the cognitive disposal of two or more receivers);
- (ii) Situation of the partially shared original (in this case the original is not fully but only partially accessible to the receiver – for instance when the receiver can rely on fragments, traces, symptoms);
- (iii) Situation where different receivers have access respectively to different parts of the original and not the same partial original like in the former case (ii).

The above-mentioned cases are nothing but variations of the minimal communicative situation, termed as the situation of the present original. However, the original may not be available at all, that is, the original may be completely absent. Osolsobě (1979b: 553) referred to this case as the "zero communicative situation" and it can be schematically represented as follows (Fig. 3):

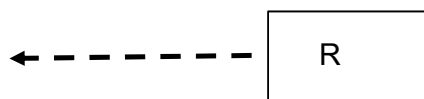


Figure 3. The situation of the absent original or the zero communicative situation (adapted from Osolsobě 1979b).

This said, the absence of the original could be overcome in two different ways. First of all, the absence of the original can be replaced by means of a model, that is, by relying on an apt surrogate of the original. In the 'situation of the non-present original' the model is something that substitutes the original in the process of knowing. The model is thought of as an information surrogate that substitutes the original. Viewed through this perspective, a model is thought of as an apt non-original used as substitute for knowing the original (Osolsobě 1979a: 237). Through the model the receiver represents the original, thus modifying the former situation of the non-present original, in as much as it presents a model that stands for an original. As the author points out:

If the original is 'present', that is, if it is at the disposal of our cognitive activities, we can acquire knowledge about it, perceive it, observe it, we can experiment with it, analyze it, sometimes even dissect it, etc. But if we face the 'situation of the non-present original', that is, if the original is not at the disposal of our cognitive activities at all, or if it is at the disposal of some of them only, we must solve this situation either with the help of another original (which is the solution of models) or with the help of another person (which is communication). (Osolsobě 1971: 35)

For Osolsobě communication through the model is "non-ostensive" whereas communication through the original is "ostensive". For Ivo Osolsobě ostension is thought of as "a type of communication where the reality itself, the thing, the situation or event itself functions in the role of message" (Osolsobě 1971: 35). Ostensive communication is schematised as follows (Fig. 4).

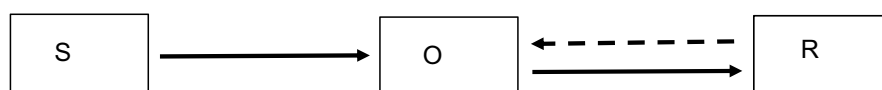


Figure 4. Ostensive communication (adapted from Osolsobě 1979b).

Ostension, thought of as the act of showing that occurs when something is used to signify itself by means of itself, challenges the very presupposition of the sign, that is, its standing-for relation. The paradox of ostension – as apparent in Osolsobě's perspective – lies in the fact that the semiosis by ostension is based not on plurality but, on the contrary, its distinctiveness lies in the identity of the thing with itself, in as much as the object stands for itself and not for something else. This aspect is apparent in one of the most 'radical' definitions of ostension, described as "a type of communication where the reality itself, the thing, the situation or event itself functions in the role of message. [...] Ostension requires absolute similarity, that is, identity" (Osolsobě 1971: 35). Conceived

in these terms, ostension challenges the very logic of the sign relation, raising the following question: how can something signify itself and yet take part in the meaning-generation process bypassing the standing-for relation that each sign presupposes? Ultimately, ostension, generally defined as "the action of showing, exhibiting, displaying, presenting" (Sebeok 1986: 656), calls attention to the object as such and rehabilitates what Charles Morris has termed as the *denotatum* (Morris 1955 [1946]: 17). In the case of ostension, the object stands for itself, signifying itself, somewhat obliterating the fundamental difference that exists between sign and object.

In conclusion, Osolsob's vision of ostension – although highly original – rests problematic inasmuch as it conceives of ostension as a non-sign.

Ostensive signs in the semiotics of Umberto Eco

Ostensive signs find a specific position in the classification of signs formulated by Umberto Eco (1976 [1975]; 1979; 1980 [1973]; 1985). If, as explained by Eco (1980 [1973]: 54), to ask for a packet of cigarettes I show a pack of cigarettes, the item I have in my hands is conventionally elected as a signifier of the class of which the object itself is a member.

The author further specifies that the ostensive sign does not coincide completely with its referent. The ostension of a pack of cigarettes as a sign of the general class "cigarettes", in fact, implies the selection of some qualities of the object that are relevant for the identification of the general class to which it belongs, while it excludes others (for instance, the cigarettes' brand) (Eco 1980 [1973]: 54). Therefore, in the example given, it is irrelevant whether these are Marlboro or Camel cigarettes.

The definition of ostension in the semiotics of Umberto Eco (1985: 179) is, thus, as follows: "ostension occurs when a pre-existing object is selected and shown as the representative of the class to which it belongs".

Moreover, Eco (1980 [1973]: 54) points out that almost all ostensive signs are "intrinsic signs" or "contiguous" as these are signs that refer to an object by showing a part of it. In other words, an essential feature that distinguishes ostensive signs from other types of signs is that the signifier of the ostensive signs is occasionally formed with a substance that is the same as that of the object to which they refer; for this reason ostensive signs are "homomaterial" (Eco 1975 [1976]: 225). Not always, though, are ostensive signs homomaterial. In the example cited, in order to signify "cigarettes" one could resort to the use of a pack of cigarettes made of plastic instead of a real one.

The problem of the degree of conventionality that ostensive signs possess must not be disregarded either. Eco, in fact, notes that ostensive signs also have an element of conventionality that is proportional to the degree to which meaning is

determined by cultural codes. The simple gesture of ostensively displaying an object with one hand suggests different meanings in different socio-cultural contexts.

Finally, for Eco (1975 [1976]: 225) – as recalled before – ostension is “the most elementary level of active signification” and can be used as a substitutive code in the absence of a common language.

Summarising Eco’s position on the subject, we can list the essential characteristics of ostensive signs as follows:

- a) Ostensive signs entail a selection of a pre-existing object and the latter is shown as the representative of the class to which it belongs;
- b) Ostensive signs are occasionally homomaterial;
- c) Ostensive signs are conventional;
- d) Ostension is the basic level of active signification;

It is clear that, in his treatment of ostensive, Eco pays particular attention to the phenomenon of sign production and its variety. Ostension, therefore, is conceived of as a specific modality through which a sign can be produced.

Conclusion

The present study attempted to account for the relevance of the concept of ostension by tracing its fundamental aspects and situating the debate on this subject in the framework of contemporary semiotics. The study has favoured the exposition of three perspectives on the subject – R. Jakobson, I. Osolsobě and U. Eco – which, in our view, summarise the essential features of the concept given in the context of the typologies of signs theorised within semiotic theory.

As we have seen, for Osolsobě ostension is coextensive with the referent that is signified by means of the act of showing and, for this reason, is paradoxically considered a non-sign. Although innovative and suggestive, Osolsobě’s hypothesis of a pure exposition we think can be justified only as pure abstraction. The possibility that the sign is completely identified with its referent can in fact be met only if we assume that all objects that are selected as a vehicle of ostensive communication become, in turn, signs, verifying in this way a “semiotisation of the referent” (Eco 1980 [1973]: 54). Osolsobě’s interpretation, unanchored from this important corollary, is ultimately problematic.

Thomas A. Sebeok, for his part, had already highlighted the difficulties of this approach:

Osolsobě wants to sharply distinguish ostension from indexicality, deixis, natural signs, communication by objects, and the like. However, I find his paradoxical assertion that ‘ostension is the cognitive use of non-signs’, and his elaboration of a theory of ostension as a theory of non-signs, muddled and perplexing”. (Sebeok 2001 [1994]: 89)

Unlike Osolsobě, Eco's approach, which seems to us more consistent and sensitive to the pragmatic context of signification, does not assume that there is coincidence between the ostensive sign and the referent and, even in the possibility that a complete overlap may occur, the object selected as a signifier for the general class to which it refers enters, indeed, into the process of semiosis and therefore it must be considered a sign.

Jakobson's vision – which, as we have seen, did not fail to emphasize the importance of ostension as a type of signs – in its turn, can be seen as a middle ground between the approaches of Eco and Osolsobě. Jakobson, in fact, in a way not dissimilar to Eco, holds that ostension is a fully-fledged part of the typologies of signs. He, however, does not sufficiently explore the issue and merely provides what is for him an undisputed and important tenet: namely, that ready-made objects are fully included in the production of signs. In conclusion, the definition of ostensive sign formulated by Eco seems to us still the most valid and comprehensive in the context of contemporary semiotics.

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