

TOPICAL ISSUES OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Laughter as a Semiotic Problem

Purpose. The article is aimed to substantiate the view on the phenomenon of laughter as a subject of semiotic analysis, which leads to the following tasks: to reveal the possibilities of semiotics application in the study of laughter nature; to analyze the phenomenon of laughter as a cultural and natural phenomenon, as a sign and as an attribute; to consider the place of laughter in culture, which is understood as a sign system. **Theoretical basis.** The semiotic approach proceeds from the fact that human lives in the world of signs, all the surrounding reality can be interpreted as a sign system. The basic concept of semiotics is the concept of a sign. The theoretical basis of the article is understanding the culture as a sign-symbolic system. Laughter is considered as a phenomenon ontologically rooted in human culture. At the same time, laughter is on the edge of culture. The research is based on the work of semiotic authors, cultural researchers, and the researchers of laughter. **Originality.** The originality lies in the application of the semiotic method to the research of laughter phenomenon, consideration of the dialectics of natural and cultural, signedness and non-signedness, manifested in the phenomenon of laughter. **Conclusions.** Laughter is considered as a psychophysiological phenomenon (attribute) and as a cultural phenomenon (sign). Laughter acts as an emotional manifestation, a physiological reaction, but socially and culturally mediated. In any case, laughter indicates an emotional or cognitive state of a human. Laughter acts as a process and result of the interpretation of a sign, a reaction to a sign. Laughter is a form and a means of communication. Being a natural phenomenon, in the process of social evolution, laughter acquires signedness, is integrated by culture as a sign system, and, at the same time, maintains a connection with nature. Thus, laughter occupies an ambivalent position between nature and culture. In the phenomenon of laughter, the dual state of human is revealed. In laughter, boundaries are blurred, the unity and opposition of natural and cultural, biological and social, soul and body, thought and feeling, sign and attribute are manifested.

Keywords: human nature; culture; laughter; sign; semiotics

Introduction

Laughter is a multifaceted phenomenon and one can consider it in various aspects. On the one hand it is a bodily, biological phenomenon, on the other – social, cultural. Therefore, laughter has become a research object, both in biology, psychology, medicine, and philosophy, sociology, cultural science, etc.

Many works deal with various aspects of laughter and humor. Recent works include the following: K. Alter and D. Wildgruber characterize laughter as a social signal, expressing emotion or intention without words. Laughter conveys signals of acceptance or rejection in society (Alter & Wildgruber, 2018). C. Arning (2021) showed how the BBC used semiotic analysis for the practical application of humor, striving to remain a modern developing brand. M. Borodenko and V. Petrovsky (2021) in their semiological approach define humor as "sign-based identification of non-identifiable signs within the space of conventionality". C. Mazzocconi, Y. Tian and J. Ginzburg (2020) examine the pragmatic functions of laughter in

a social, situational, and linguistic context. C. Paolucci and F. Caruana attempt to substantiate the "alternative approach to laughter, grounded on semiotics and ethology" in their article. The authors believe that laughter is, first and foremost, a means for social bonding and communication that evolved for boosting basic forms of affiliation (Paolucci & Caruana, 2019). A. Viana (2017) considers social and cognitive aspects of humor as part of social semiotics. The works of G. B. Milner and A. G. Kozintsev are of particular interest to us. G. B. Milner, for example, thinks that

...the biological function of humour-based laughter may be strictly analogous to that of the enjoyment derived from the satisfaction of hunger or thirst. It is possible, that is to say, to argue that the function of this enjoyment is to ensure that man does not stray too far from the golden mean between nature and culture, the two categories of elements that, in the right balance and proportion, make up the terms of the human equation. (Milner, 1972, p. 26)

A. G. Kozintsev studies the phenomenon of laughter on the background of biocultural ambivalence. He considers laughter as a non-semiotic phenomenon that destroys all meaning (Kozintsev, 2002, 2007).

We also referred to this topic in some of our works (Mykhailiuk & Vershyna, 2019; Mykhailiuk & Vershyna, 2020). However, the problem of laughter semiotics itself remains controversial and understudied. Although the existing semantic theories of humor (V. Raskin, S. Attardo etc.) confirm the semiotic nature of laughter (since semantics is a section of semiotics), they consider the mechanism of humor itself, and not the semiotic basis of laughter.

Laughter is definitely different from simple physiological reactions such as yawning, sneezing, blinking, etc. in fact it always in one way or another indicates the emotional or cognitive state of a human (Bogdanov, 2001; Provine, 2000). Since laughter is accessible to interpretation and reading, it can be considered as a subject of semiotic research (Komar, 2002). Laughter has a sign nature and acts either as a reaction to a sign, or as, in fact, a sign. If for a laughing person laughter is a spontaneous action, then for an external observer it is, in any case, a sign or an attribute.

Purpose

In view of the above, the article is aimed to substantiate the view on the phenomenon of laughter as a subject of semiotic analysis, which causes the solution of the following tasks: to reveal the possibilities of using semiotics in the study of laughter nature; to analyze the phenomenon of laughter as a cultural and natural phenomenon, as a sign and as an attribute; to consider the place of laughter in a culture, which is understood as a sign system.

Statement of basic materials

Laughter as a sign and as an attribute

Laughter is a form of direct, concrete-sensory perception of the world. It is, first of all, a physiological reaction, a bodily sensation, an involuntary contraction of the facial and pectoral muscles, accompanied by non-verbal vocal manifestations. In this it is like yawning, sneezing, hiccups. But we distinguish between just a bodily sensation, caused, for example, by tickling, and an emotional-evaluative reflection of consciousness on an external sign action. There are also two types of laughter – Duchenne and non-Duchenne – involuntary sincere laughter and deliberate laughter.

One can laugh at something, or from something. Laughter acts as emotional reaction to something. It suggests a reason or object for laughing – something funny (or seemingly funny). If there is nothing to laugh at, then this is laughter from something – a purely psychophysiological phenomenon (such as yawning, sneezing, hiccups), then laughter is no longer a sign, but an attribute (symptom).

A sign acts as an artificial cultural form. It is the result of designation, a product of human consciousness and activity. Attribute is a natural phenomenon that exists objectively, independently of human consciousness. Natural signs are natural processes or phenomena that are not produced as signs, but which, nevertheless, are perceived and interpreted as signs. They are called signs-indexes (C. Peirce), directions, alerts (Anzeichen, Hinweis) (E. Husserl), symptoms (K. Bühler).

When we talk about attribute, we comprehend them in a certain conventional sense, restoring either the connection between two phenomena, or a direct indication of one phenomenon to another (high temperature is an attribute of illness, etc.). The problem is also in recognizing the attribute as such. Thus, for some people, a bright sunset is just a beautiful sight, while for others it is an attribute of an impending storm. Attributes need to be interpreted correctly. For example, the professionalism of a physician is to make a diagnosis based on symptoms.

Laughter can be a symptom of mental disorder, illness or a result of chemical action. Thus, having eaten a few seeds of *Datura metel*, a human starts laughing without any reason for 30 minutes. Fits of laughter without reason may be one of the symptoms of disseminated sclerosis. A Latin proverb, especially popular in the Middle Ages, says: "Per risum multum debes cognoscere stultum" ("you can recognize the fool by excessive laughter"). A Russian proverb is expressed in a rougher form: "Laughing for no reason is a sign of stupidity". Or, according to A. G. Kozintsev (2007), "the result of a temporary "foolishness" of a subject who begins to look at the world from the point of view of a small child, a drunk, defective person and – quite possibly – his/her distant ancestor" (authors' transl.) (p. 229).

According to A. G. Kozintsev, a human "unconsciously reflects on language and culture. He/she temporarily acquires the ability to contemplate the level of signs from the meta-level, notices their conventionality, deprives them of their content plane and plays with the expression plan". A. G. Kozintsev writes:

Before us is non-sign that pretended to be a sign. It is in the exposure of

this pretense that the main reason for joy lies, and not in the signified and

not in the signifier. ... In essence, humor uses ex-signs, empty shells of former signs, or, according to Kant, 'representations of reason, through which nothing is thought'. (authors' transl.) (Kozintsev, 2007, p. 161)

In this regard, it is also interesting the concept of "counter-sign" – a dynamic sign, a destroyer of signs, a self-opposing sign, which "depletes" its signifier (Borodenko & Petrovsky, 2021). But what is a "counter-sign" – also a sign, but with a different sense, meaning or content. "Counter-sign", "non-sign", "ex-sign", etc., in the words of C. Peirce (1932), "but the embodiment has nothing to do with its character as a sign" (CP 2.244).

In the case of laughter, the line between sign and attribute is very fragile. On the one hand, laughter is the result of a natural process, but on the other hand, it is an act of communication. Here one can make some analogy with C. Geertz's "double wink". The deliberate closure of the eyelids in the conditions of the existence of a social code, according to which this is taken as a conspiratorial signal, is winking (Geertz, 1973). Whether laughter is a sign or an attribute depends on the situation, on the reasons for its occurrence and on our interpretation of it.

Even if we do not understand the reason for laughter, it still has some presumption of sign-ness (a sign of cognitive and emotional assessment and/or internal state of a human). Laughter and crying are not just a biological fact, but a worldview fact with its own semantic history (Freidenberg, 1997, p. 95). Even sneezing and yawning acquire a kind of signedness.

Laughter is an expression of emotions. Emotions are directly related to the physiological manifestations of the body. Emotions usually arise before a rational assessment of the situation. They are direct reflection, experience, not reflexivity. But, as A. N. Leontev notes, even the so-called primary emotions in a human are the product of socio-historical development, the result of the transformation of their instinctive, biological forms, on the one hand, and the formation of new types of emotions, on the other. This also applies to emotionally expressive, mimic and pantomimic movements, which, being included in the process of communication between people, acquire a largely conditional, signal, and at the same time social character (Leontev, 1971, p. 22). "... Laughter initially requires social space; its existence is rooted in social existence" (Sychev, 2003, p. 84). We can talk about laughter as a communicative process, during which mutual understanding is established (or not established) between the subjects of communication (Afanasiev & Vasilenko, 2003). Laughter, anyway, is a message (intentional or unintentional). Since laughter manifests itself through sounds and facial expressions and can be perceived by others, it is thereby already a form of communication. Laughter, when it acts as a sign, is also a sign for someone. Laughter can be considered as a specific language.

A. G. Kozintsev (2002) believes that laughter is incompatible with speech, it acts as its antagonist and temporary interrupter (p. 29). But, in our opinion, laughter can complement, accompany speech, thereby enhancing its influence. Laughter also acts as a reaction to speech. Thus, laughter and speech are not mutually exclusive. Laughter punctuates speech (Provine, 2017, p. 239). Moreover, there is an opinion about the primordially linguistic essence of laughter as a phenomenon of human culture (Bondarenko, 2009, p. 5).

In our opinion, it is very problematic to classify laughter as a "pre-symbolic communicative means", "ancestral memory" that connects human behavior with the behavior of his ancestors, as A. G. Kozintsev (2007, p. 197) thinks. According to him, laughter, smile, crying, yawning are

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just in the intermediate zone, for which two systems of motor control compete – the pyramidal and evolutionarily more ancient extrapyramidal, as well as the autonomic nervous system. "To avoid confusion, we will not call them 'language' and will keep this term only for symbolic systems" (authors' transl.), writes Kozintsev (2007, p. 197). Of course, laughter cannot, be called a "language" (in the form of a well-formed code of correspondence between the signified and the signifier). Laughter is a pre-language formation. Laughter operates not with concepts (concepts are already a different level of designation, a product of rational thinking, and laughter is an immediate emotional reaction), but with images and ideas (it is probably more appropriate to talk about "concepts", "patterns" or "scripts"). The language of laughter is directed not so much to thoughts as to emotions; it is initially connotative.

Like sneezing, hiccups and yawning indicate a human him/herself and at the same time something superhuman, a priori beyond the control of a human (Bogdanov, 2001). Laughter is a reaction to an external physical influence – for example, tickling, or sign (informational). Laughter, like sneezing, does not depend on the human intentions. But unlike sneezing, caused by a purely external influence, laughter also depends on the human him/herself. On the one hand, laughter is an involuntary indicator of a human's inner state, and on the other, an act of communication. Sometimes these sides coincide, combine, and sometimes oppose each other – in the case of forced laughter, imitation of laughter. Or, on the contrary, when we laugh at something that, from the point of view of morality and cultural norms, should not be laughed at. For example – at physical deformity, at the misfortune of a neighbor, at the fall of a person who slipped, etc. Willful, imperious, or moral constraints control laughter only up to a certain level. "Laughter acquired complete, immanent independence not only from our will and consciousness, but also from our subconsciousness (at least, individual), becoming more spontaneous than any other 'expressive movement'" (authors' transl.), believes A. G. Kozintsev (2002, p. 34). Laughter constantly reminds of human helplessness in front of his/her own sensual spontaneity (Gomilko, 2020, p. 43).

Depending on the addressee, the sign can change its semantic information. And this results in a change in the sign meaning. Two different people can understand the same sign in different ways. It all depends on the properties of the interpreter. What we laugh at speaks more about ourselves than about the object of laughter. But nevertheless, despite the known age and socio-cultural differences in assessments of the degree of funny in a given situation, most people nevertheless display a certain uniformity in their understanding of what is funny and what is not.

Thus, laughter is a double-bottomed phenomenon. On the one hand, laughter is socially determined and culturally mediated. At the same time, it is spontaneous and natural. However, the lines between "conscious" and "unconscious" laughter can be quite blurred (Gervais & Wilson, 2005), as the boundary between sign and attribute in the case of laughter.

Laughter between nature and culture

The problem of the semiotic nature of laughter is associated with the problem of the relationship between nature and culture. Nature and culture are interconnected, culture grows out of nature, is an extension of nature. The term culture itself indicates the dialectic of the artificial and the natural. Culture is built on interaction with nature. But culture is also a matter of following rules, and this too involves an interplay of the regulated and unregulated. If culture transfigures nature, it is a project to which nature sets rigorous limits (Eagleton, 2000, p. 10).

Signs act as universal mediators between human and reality. Culture is, first of all, a designated space, a space where signs become signs. From the semiotic point of view, culture is un-

derstood as a sign system that is a mediator between a human and the world around him/her. Phenomena of culture are signs and sets of signs (texts), which contain social information, that is, the meaning and content encrypted by people.

E. Cassirer defined human as an animal symbolicum. Human lives in two worlds – nature and culture, things and signs. Human existence turns out to be simultaneously connected both with the physical world and with the space of signs (ontological and semiotic realities). Human and culture are inseparable phenomena. Human acts as a cultural artifact. Signs shape his/her. Peirce believed that all thoughts must exist in signs, that every thought is a sign. When we think, we ourselves, what we are at the moment, act as signs (Peirce, 1934, CP 5.253, 5.283-284). But human also limits him/herself to signs. Reality is given to human through signs, but human also shields him/herself from reality by signs. Human trusts signs more than direct experience. Culture sets a coordinate system for a human to perceive the world, perception adjusts to this markup. This makes the whole world recognizable and filled with semiotic experience. Culture through signs forms a certain image of reality, which acts as a kind of barrier between consciousness and reality, an obstacle that is not recognized and not reflected by this consciousness, at least at the everyday level.

Culture is the "macrocode" of a society that integrates all the convention systems that function in it. Culture includes many codes – behavioral, aesthetic, ontological, identification, and at the same time meaning, as the configuration and intersection of various codes. Culture models consciousness of human and his/her idea of the world through the space of signs. The "cultural code" embedded in each person allows navigating in all the diversity of the surrounding world, systematizing in a certain way the information received and choosing from the objectively available possibilities. But at the same time, it limits thinking to certain stereotype frameworks, which an individual, as a rule, cannot exceed. The very process of mastering speech makes thinking standard, deindividualized. Culture sets standards and strives for stereotypes. The sign (information) removes uncertainty, reduces entropy, i.e. establishes certainty, sets boundaries. Any boundaries and certainties are repressive, they limit the living space, "narrow" a human. The sign requires recognition, the ability to read, construe, interpret it. Designation sets rules and conventions. Thus, the sign is regulatory. There is always a coercive attitude in interpretation. In the designated space, we constantly feel limitation, pressure and lack of freedom. "The symbolic as the repressive" (Zerzan, 1994).

Laughter can be considered as a kind of reaction to the repressiveness of culture, as a moment of liberation from the repressiveness of culture. Laughter reveals the relativity of any fundamental principle, acts as a sign of the end of restrictions, is a means of devaluing the norms of behavior, desacralization – power, authority, moral norms, generally accepted values, rules and conventions. Laughter culture creates an island of independence, creates an environment in which stereotypical behavior turns out to be meaningless and ineffective. The perception patterns break. Laughter allows us to look at the familiar structures of our familiar world as something random, optional, and sometimes stupid and unnecessary. The main thing is that laughter destroys symbols, doubts the usual meanings, shows the convention of a sign. The overcoming of the repressiveness of the sign (symbolic) takes place. Laughter liberates, gives a human semiotic freedom (authors' transl.) (Bondarenko, 2009, p. 22).

Laughter appears as a result of overcoming the boundary between consciousness and reality, as disclosure, due to personal experience, collective ideas, going beyond the conventional coordinate system. Thus, it accompanies the formation of the personality, the separation of the per-

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sonality from the collective, the priority of the personal principle over the collective. The connection between nature and culture is being restored. "Laughter does not return a human from culture to nature, but reminds him/her of the artificiality of his/her cultural state" (authors' transl.), thinks A. G. Kozintsev (2007, p. 203). At the same time, A. G. Kozintsev (2007) asserts that "a 'natural' state does not exist in a human – he/she has only a cultural state. Laughter marks the boundary of a cultural role, and not such a boundary where one serious role replaces another, but the one beyond which there is a breakdown into a role-free state, into chaos" (authors' transl.) (p. 152).

Laughter (as a sign) is a cultural phenomenon, associated with culture, rooted in culture. In culture, laughter acquires signedness, and together with it, the need for a code arises as a rigidly defined type of transition from the form to content. Laughter also becomes repressive, especially towards the human being laughed at.

Culture also acts as a way of establishing meaning. M. Weber called the human "animal hanging on a web of meanings woven by himself or herself". It would seem that by destroying the system of cultural conventions, laughter also destroys this "web of meanings". And this, in fact, does not happen. In fact, laughter only strengthens it. Acting as a criticism of culture, laughter strengthens the culture, becomes a part of it. It is a part of this web itself, inscribed in a semiotic cultural context. A "simulation of the social matrix", the canalization of destructive intentions, the translation of unconscious desires and impulses unacceptable for society into acceptable forms take place. Laughter is "tamed" by culture. Laughter, one way or another, is regulated by certain cultural and social circumstances and norms: the system of upbringing and education, legal prohibitions, religious attitudes, public opinion, communication characteristics, etc.

Laughter is, first of all, a cultural phenomenon and should be considered in a socio-cultural context, in connection with all other cultural phenomena. According to R. Scruton (1986), man is the only animal that laughs, laughter is a property of the mind (a sign that distinguishes humans and gods from animals) (p. 156). While there has been a lot of research recently showing that animals, in particular primates, have laughter and even a sense of humor, we believe that primate laughter is still different from human laughter. Nonhuman primates can be limited to involuntary laughter (Provine, 2017, p. 239). Primate laughter is not reflective or culturally mediated. "Homo ridens" still implies "Animal symbolicum".

In our opinion, laughter, in the process of social evolution, has acquired a signedness (if, suppose, it is associated only with "ancestral memory"). It seems that laughter belongs precisely to the sign-symbolic sphere of human activity and is a purely human property, although it is "on the edge" of culture.

Originality

It has been substantiated that the phenomenon of laughter can act as a subject of semiotic analysis. The phenomenon of laughter reveals a complex dialectic of cultural and natural, signedness and unsignedness.

Conclusions

Laughter, of course, can be perceived as a departure from culture, a return to the "pre-sign state". But even violating cultural norms, rejecting and refuting culture, a human, living in socie-

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ty, still cannot go beyond the framework of culture. But if a human is "doomed to culture", then to an even greater extent he/she is doomed to nature. Culture itself is limited, determined by nature.

The possibility of laughter follows from the duality of the human position, who is simultaneously in two worlds – ontological and semiotic. Their discrepancy gives rise to duality, ambiguity of perception. Laughter brings back uncertainty, pushes the limits, gives more semiotic freedom. But the achievement of complete uncertainty, unlimitedness, unconditionality and unsign-edness, "a breakdown into a role-free state, into chaos" is still impossible.

Laughter appears as a phenomenon that combines natural and cultural, individual and social, sign and non-sign, destroying signedness. The opposition natural – cultural, natural – artificial at the semiotic level is realized as opposition attribute – sign. A human resides simultaneously in two worlds – the world of nature and the world of culture, the world of signs and the world of attributes. Laughter can act as a sign or as an attribute (symptom). Laughter is ambivalent. It is spontaneous and natural, accidental and unpredictable. But at the same time, laughter is socially, historically and culturally conditioned. Laughter is an integral part of culture. Being a sign, it destroys a signedness, being a natural phenomenon, it strengthens culture as a sign system. In the process of laughter, the designation of the undesignated and the undesignation of the designated, the socialization of the biological (physiological, psychological) and the biologization of the social, take place. Laughter blurs the boundaries between nature and culture, between sign and attribute. The phenomenon of laughter makes it possible to at least partially see the dual state of human, his/her fixation in being – both inside and outside social and cultural circumstances.

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Сміх як семіотична проблема

Мета. Обґрунтувати погляд на феномен сміху як на предмет семіотичного аналізу, що обумовлює розв'язання наступних завдань: розкрити можливості застосування семіотики в сфері дослідження природи сміху; проаналізувати феномен сміху як явище культурне і природне, як знак і як ознаку; розглянути місце сміху в культурі, котра розуміється як знакова система. **Теоретичний базис.** Семіотичний підхід виходить з того, що людина живе в світі знаків, тому вся навколишня дійсність може трактуватися як знакова система. Базовим поняттям семіотики є поняття знака. Теоретичною основою статті є розуміння культури як знаково-символічної системи. Сміх розглядається як явище, онтологічно вкорінене в людській культурі. У той же час, сміх знаходиться на межі культури. Дослідження засноване на роботах авторів, які займаються семіотикою, дослідників культури, а також дослідників сміху. **Наукова новизна.** Оригінальність полягає в застосуванні семіотичного методу до дослідження феномену сміху, розгляді діалектики природного і культурного, знаковості і незнаковості, що проявляється у феномені сміху. **Висновки.** Сміх розглядається як психофізіологічний феномен (ознака) і як культурний феномен (знак). Сміх постає як емоційний прояв, фізіологічна реакція, але соціально і культурно опосередкована. У будь-якому випадку сміх вказує на емоційний або когнітивний стан людини та виступає як процес і результат інтерпретації знака, реакція на знак. Сміх є формою і засобом комунікації. Будучи природним явищем, сміх в процесі соціальної еволюції набуває знаковості, інтегрується культурою як знаковою системою, і, в той же час, зберігає зв'язок з природою. Сміх, таким чи-

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ном, займає подвійне становище між природою і культурою. В феномені сміху проявляється двоїтий стан людини. Сміх розмиває межі, виявляє єдність і протиставлення природного і культурного, біологічного і соціального, душі і тіла, думки і почуття, знака й ознаки.

Ключові слова: природа людини; культура; сміх; знак; семіотика

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