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Krešimir Šimić

Eco's *Lingua Edenica* and "Other Languages": A Biblical-Theological Critique of Umberto Eco's Semiotics

Ecova Lingua Edenica in ,drugi jeziki':

biblično-teološka kritika semiotike Umberta Eca

Abstract: The paper introduces a close reading of Eco's article "Generazione di messaggi estetici in una lingua edenica" (1971), in which he fictionalized the biblical story from Gen 2 to show that the aesthetic use of language generates internal contradictions (self-contradictions), as well as that any such contradiction at the level of expression/form also entails a contradiction at the level of content. Furthermore, the basic postulates of Eco's semiotic theory revolving around the sign-function are discussed, followed by outlining certain theological-semiotics of language based on the text from the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles (descent of the Spirit). It is based on an original sign – which is not, as with Eco, a sign associated with another sign (interpretant) within a sign system (code) nor a "dynamic object," but it is the Mystical Body. The paper concludes by arguing that it is this very Body, and not the poetic invention, that generates "other languages" (ἑτέρας γλώσσας) and consequently a communion, which is not multiethnic nor multilingual, but a Catholic community.

Keywords: Umberto Eco, semiotic, sign, "other languages", Mystical Body

Povzetek: Prispevek predstavlja natančno branje Ecovega članka „Generazione di messaggi estetici in una lingua edenica“ (1971) – v njem poustvarja svetopi-semsko zgodbo iz 2. poglavja Geneze, da bi pokazal, da estetska raba jezika ustvarja notranja protislovja (samoprotislovja) in da vsako tako protislovje na ravni izraza/forme vključuje tudi protislovje na ravni vsebine. Ob tem so obravnavani osnovni postulati Ecove semiotične teorije, ki se vrtijo okoli funkcije znaka, čemur sledi oris nekaterih teološko-semiotičnih vidikov jezika na podlagi besedila iz drugega poglavja Apostolskih del (sestop Duha). Ta temelji na izvornem znaku, ki ni (kot pri Eco) znak, povezan z drugim znakom (razlagalcem) znotraj znakovnega sistema (koda), niti „dinamični predmet“, temveč Mistično Telo. Prispevek se zaključuje z argumentom, da prav to Telo, in ne pesniška iznajdba, ustvarja „druge jezike“ (ἑτέρας γλώσσας) in posledično občestvo, ki ni ne multietnično ne večjezično, pač pa katoliška skupnost.

Ključne besede: Umberto Eco, semiotika, znak, „drugi jeziki“, mistično telo

1. Introduction

Although the notion of the divine origin of language has left a profound mark on Western culture (among others), the topic of *lingua adamica* might come as a surprise, especially if one avoids the historiographical approach, as is the case with this paper. Namely, the “new philology” – having developed at the threshold of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with comparative grammar and the categorisation of languages into families as its main pillars – rejected the thesis on the divine origin of language. Finally, the twentieth century “revelation of language” (M. Foucault) seemed to fully banish the (religious) attitude that God granted language to man in heaven as well as *that*, Adamic language expressed the true nature and essence of things (*etymon*), i.e. that it did not consist of conventional signs. Yet, it becomes obvious that this Adamic language is not alien to the contemporary academic *milieu* or pop culture if one delves into an extensive work of one of the brightest beacons of those two areas, the “master of words” – as he was oftentimes called – Umberto Eco.

Eco dealt with the topic of Adamic language in a two-fold way: on the one hand, he was interested in the history of searching for the perfect language, wherein he could not omit Adam (Eco 1995, 8; 352–353), while on the other hand, he used the notion of *lingua adamica* (i.e. *edenica*) to showcase his own semiotic theory. Hence, both the latter and the former (historiographic research and semiotic theory) – as is inherent to a true postmodernist – served Eco as a sizable foundation for his largely detective novels (what else?). It is almost superfluous to mention his debut novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980), as well as the ones that followed: *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), *The Island of the Day Before* (1994), *Baudolino* (2000), *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004), *The Prague Cemetery* (2010), and *Numero Zero* (2015). Since all these novels, originally published in Italian, were soon translated to English (as well as to many other languages, of which, at least the widespread ones such as French and German, Eco the polyglot, the translator, and the champion of *confusio linguarum* knew himself) and reference – either directly or in the background – the idea of Adamic language, *lingua adamica* that has become a certain *topos* for contemporary pop-culture. Due to necessary limitation and considering the aim of this paper (the attempt to explore Eco's semiotic theory and outline a certain theology of language), the paper will bypass Eco's novels and focus on his fictionalization of the biblical story “Generazione di messaggi estetici in una lingua edenica” (1971).

By applying Peirce's concept of unlimited semiosis, Eco engaged with the biblical story in the manner of Giacomo Leopardi's philosophical reflections to show that the aesthetic use of language generates internal contradictions (self-contradictions), as well as that any such contradiction at the level of expression entails contradiction at the level of content (Bondanella 1997, 82). Consequently, the mentioned work, revealing both Eco's semiotic beginnings and final phase (Caesar 1999, 75), will now be approached by means of “close reading”. This mode of reading is not only a methodological choice, but also a kind of *hint* to thinking

about language by starting from reading the particular biblical text (the event of "other languages"; Acts 2) – but more about that after "reading" Eco.

2. Linguistic Experimentation – "Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language"

"Generazione di messaggi estetici in una lingua edenica" was originally published in the journal *Strumenty Critici* (1971), where it was titled "Sulla possibilità di generare messaggi estetici in una lingua edenica". Later it was included in the collections of articles *Le forme del contenuto* (1971) and *The Role of the Reader* (1984), where it was translated according to its original title ("On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language"), and as a supplement to the third edition of *The Open Work* (1976 in Italian, 1989 in English), which the critics deemed Eco's presemiotic phase. Since the latter work was re-published by Eco several months after the Italian edition of *A Theory of Semantics* (1976), he supposed he might be asked whether he could once more write *The Open Work* in the light of his semiotic research and finally show how the "entire thing works". The answer would be, emphasises Eco, as follows: "To be blunt /.../ I already have. In the essay 'Generazione di messaggi estetici in una lingua edenica' /.../ It's only sixteen pages, but I don't think there is anything to add." (Caesar 1999, 75) Let us look at them!¹

Although surrounded by a lush environment, Adam and Eve devised a limited series of semantic units (minimum labelling units) that favoured primarily their emotional relationship (values and attitudes) toward flora and fauna, rather than naming and precise classification. The semantic units were structured around six relational units:

- yes vs. no
- edible vs. inedible (edible as in "can be eaten," "aimed for eating," "wanting to eat" etc.)
- good vs. evil (refers to both moral and corporal experiences)
- beautiful vs. ugly (refers to all that is pleasurable, fun, desirable etc.)
- red vs. blue (refers to an entire scale of chromatic experiences, earth is perceived as red, sky is blue, meat is red, stone is blue etc.)
- serpent vs. apple (this opposition, unlike the previous ones, does not refer to the quality of object and reaction to objects, but on the very objects; it was codified after God expressed his attitude on the apple, hence, exceptionally).

¹ This paper uses Italian ("Generazione di messaggi estetici in una lingua edenica", in Eco 1976) and English ("On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language", in Eco 1984a) trying not to betray Eco himself, aware that translation is an approximation (*la stessa cosa* – "almost the same"), i.e. a palimpsest (G. Genette) but such from one can still, in hints, read the old inscription below. Moreover, the paper tries as much as it can to read the "old" not only in allusions, but as if it were protruding strongly from underneath the "new" inscription.

One cultural unit (codified knowledge) inevitably leads to another (it turns into its interpretant), creating a series of connotations (1):

Red = edible = good = beautiful

Blue = inedible = evil = ugly

Conversely, Adam and Eve can denote and understand cultural units only by means of meaningful forms (*forme significanti*). Therefore, they are given or are slowly developing (Eco is not interested in which exactly) an extremely simple language sufficient to express the indicated concepts. The repertoire of this language derives from two voices: A and B, which can be combined into sequences according to the rule X, nY, X. Therefore, each sequence must begin with the first element, followed by *n* repetitions of the second element, and end with only one repetition of the first element. With such a rule, it is possible to generate an infinite number of syntactically correct sequences. However, Adam and Eve know only a limited repertoire of sequences corresponding to the mentioned cultural units. Their code (the system of expectations valid in the world of signs) is, therefore, the following (2):

ABA = edible

BAB = inedible

ABBA = good

BAAB = bad

ABBBA = serpent

BAAAAB = apple

ABBBBA = beautiful

BAAAAAB = ugly

ABBBBBA = red

BAAAAAAB = blue

Apart from that, the code includes two general operators (which can mean: allowed/forbidden; exists/does not exist etc.):

AA = yes

BB = no

There are no other syntactic rules, except for the possible combining of sequences in such a way as to bring their cultural units into a reciprocal relation of predication (e.g. BAAAAB, ABBBBBA = "apple is red" or "red apple").

Although they are only anticipating the rule of generating sequences (the encounter issues with the AA and BB sequences), Adam and Eve use the Edenic language very well. Yet, they do not know that other correct sequences can be generated as well. The reason is that, firstly, they have no need for them because they have nothing else to name and, secondly, they live in a harmonious world. The connotative series (1) are therefore structured as follows (3):

ABA = ABBA = ABBBBBA = ABBBBBBA = BAAAAB = AA

(edible = good = beautiful = red = apple = yes)

BAB = BAAB = BAAAAB = BAAAAAB = ABBBA = BB

(inedible = bad = ugly = blue = serpent = no)

Words are things (that is, familiar experiences), and things are words. That is why certain associative connotations are natural for Adam and Eve, for instance, ABA = "red". This, in turn, is a basic use of metaphor, based on the possibility of separation from the metonymic chain type (3). Only, the invention that has been shown is still minimal because all the series include familiar elements. The semiotic world of Adam and Eve is tiny, both in the form of the content and the form of the expression.

All the judgments that Adam and Eve make about the world are semiotic – they belong to an established cycle of semiosis. However, as soon as Adam and Eve became accustomed to Eden and learned to "move" in it with the help of language, God came and gave the first factual judgment (*giudizio fattuale*):² BAAAB. BAB-BAAAB. BAAB (apple inedible, apple evil). The meaning of God's factual judgment is as follows: "You think that an apple belongs to the category of good, edible things because it is red. But – I tell you, 'An apple must not be considered edible because it is evil!'" God has no need to explain why an apple is evil because he is a measure of value. For Adam and Eve, in the case of God, AA is not just a sequence used to control the combination of other sequences, but it is a name (the One who is). If they had a higher theological consciousness, Eco notes, Adam and Eve would have known that the serpent was BB. Yet, they blissfully ignored such subtlety. Either way, the serpent is blue and inedible. After God's intervention, the snake became an important detail among the Edenic resources. God's judgment is therefore not only factual but also semiotic because it leads to a new type of connotative pairing of semantic units. Thus, because of God's command, Adam and Eve can introduce changes into the connotative series set forth in (3), leading to the following series (5):

red = edible = good = beautiful = yes

serpent and apple = inedible = bad = ugly = no

This leads to the connotation: serpent = apple. The semantic world that had previously been balanced generated the first contradictions, thus becoming unbalanced. Namely, there are still perceptual habits due to which the apple is denoted as red, but it connotatively corresponds to that which is evil and inedible. The sentence (6) BAAAB. ABBBBBA (apple is red) opposes the sentence (7) BAAAB. BAAAAB (the apple is blue). Adam and Eve are, therefore, faced with a peculiarity: denotation bases its opposition through the connotation it necessarily produces. This contradiction cannot be expressed in the usual denotative words. In other words, Adam and Eve cannot point to the apple and say, "This is red" because they also know it is blue. They do not dare to formulate the sentence "apple

² Instead of the analytical vs. syntactic judgment opposition, Eco introduces the semiotic vs. factual judgment. In the process of interpretation, the first attributes to the given content the sems already given to them by the code, and the second attributes to the content that the sems have not been given to them before. When the factual judgment is stated and accepted, it becomes conventional and semiotic since the newly established connection between cultural units enters the structure of the code.

is red and blue,” so they resort to a kind of metaphor to express the new situation with the apple. Instead of the sentence BAAAB. ABBBBBA. BAAAAAB (apple is blue, it is red), they use a complex substantive expression to avoid the danger of logical contradiction and to allow them to understand the term intuitively and ambiguously (8): ABBBBBABAAAAAB (red-blue). The new word expresses a contradictory fact without asking to be formed according to the usual logical rules. Yet, it also brings about a new experience in Adam and Eve. They are fascinated by the new sound and the unusual sequence. The sequence (8) is ambiguous not only regarding the form of content but also regarding the form of expression. Thus, she becomes the origin of self-reflexivity. Adam and Eve – highlights Eco – meet words for the first time, not things.

Adam soon discovers that the sequence (8) contains the sequence BAB (inedible) at its center. The apple, *qua red-blue*, structurally incorporates a formal indication of its own inedibility, which seemed to be only one of its connotations in terms of content form. The apple becomes “inedible” even in terms of expression. Adam and Eve finally discovered the aesthetic use of language, yet without fully accepting it. The desire for the apple must be stronger to generate an aesthetic impulse. There is an interaction between the desire for the apple and the desire for language, resulting in a creative-aesthetic motivation. The next phase of Adam’s experiment brings to the fore the substance of expression (*sostanza dell’espressione*). Adam writes (9) ABBBBBA (red) with blue berry juice, and then (10) BAAAAAB (blue) with red berry juice. The sequences (9) and (10) are two metaphors. Their metaphoric nature is increased by the presence of physical elements, that is, the special emphasis inherent in the matter of the expression itself. This resulted in the transformation of the substance of expression from a mere variant into a pertinent element: the substance of expression became the form of expression. Until then, red things were imprecise referents to which the signifier ABBBBBA was applied, and now the red thing (redness of berry juice) itself became the sign-vehicle (*significante*) of an element that contains the word ABBBBBA as one of its meanings. In fact, the process of unlimited semiosis was introduced, in which each signified can become a signifier of another signified, and even of its own former signifier. Even the object (referent) can undergo the process of semiosis and become a sign. The amazed Adam and Eve – imagines Eco – watch in ecstasy for hours what was written. Adam embarks on a new adventure and writes: (11) ABBBBBBA. The sequence with six B letters does not exist in his dictionary. Since it closely resembles ABBBBBA (“red”), one could say that Adam wrote “red”, only with a graphical highlight. Highlighting the form of expression has a counterpart at the level of the form of content. In an attempt to place the new word somewhere, Adam for the first time directs his attention to the varying redness that surrounds him. The innovation in the form of expression leads him to make the content form pertinent. Thus, one B is no longer a variant of the form of the expression, but a new part of it. Adam still tries to write something even more complex (12):

BAB

BAAB

BAAAAB

BAAAAAB

BAAAAAAB

("inedible evil, apple ugly and blue")

Consequently, a progressive increase in the length of the word occurs (establishing a rhythm) and all sequences end with the same letter (establishing rhyme). The evilness of the apple is expressed through a kind of formal need that imposes (also in terms of content) that the apple is ugly and blue. Adam is so convinced of the indissolubility of form and content that he begins to think – writes Eco – *nomina sint numina*. This opinion overwhelmed him so much that he decided to amplify the rhythm and rhyme by including repetition elements into his statement (12) (13):

BAB BAB

BAAB BAB

BAAB BAB

BAB BAAAAAB

ABBA

ABBBBA

ABBBBBA

ABBBA

(good, beautiful, red – serpent is)

For her new expression, Eve uses the same formal identity between expression and content that Adam used for his poem (12). Obviously, she re-instigates the issue of self-contradiction that Adam's poem seemed to obscure: how can the serpent be the formal equivalent of things that the language system (the code) excludes as its predicates? Eva vaguely imagined a new way of creating hidden homologies between expressions and content from which new contradictions would then arise. She could, for example, make a sequence in which each letter would be composed of a semantic opposite. But – in order to produce such "concrete poetry" (*poesia concreta*), she needed a graphic sophistication which she did not possess. For this reason, Adam takes the matter into his own hands and imagines an even more ambiguous sequence (15): BAA – B (whereby the meaning of the empty space is unclear: it might be an empty or a true place). Consequently, Eva imagines her own *recitar cantando*, the Edenic *Sprachgesang* (16); ABBBA (whereby the voice rises and stays on the last B, so one does not know if it is the "serpent" or a doubling of the last B, which would then mean "beautiful"). All this (the real possibility that the language is responsible for ambiguity and deception) greatly confused Adam, due to which he shifted his anxiety from language to meanings that called into question God's commandments. While singing the indicated dilemma, he was overwhelmed by rhythm, the language in his mouth shattered into pieces and he let it roam freely in the spirit of the futuristic slogan

parole in libertà (17):

ABA BAB
 BAB BAB
 ABA BAB BAB BB B A
 BBBBBBAAAAAABBBBBB
 BAAAAA
 AA

However, just when he invented the wrong words, he began to understand more clearly why other words were correct. The generative law that governs his code (X, nY, X) became clear to him. But not only that; in the same moment when Adam understands the strict generative law of the code to which he has been subjected, he also realizes that he could set up a new code instead. As he destroys the code, he discovers that he is its master. Only a moment ago he thought that poetry was the medium spoken by the gods, but now he discovers the *arbitrariness of the sign*. He composes new sequences, invents vocal colours, manages form, flatters himself that he has created a poetic language that will eventually reach all meanings, he intends to compile a book to give an orphic explanation of the land, while the work gradually replaces the author.

And while in the last part of the last sentence, it is not difficult to see an allusion to Roland Barthes's famous essay *La mort de l'auteur* (1967), the essay in its entirety – supposedly without Eco's intention (which is in a way "in the spirit" of the aforementioned Barthes's essay) – evokes Kant, whom Eco often referred to.³ Regardless of the fact that he is a famous author, it is a lesser-known text (*Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte*, 1786). In Gen 3, Kant saw Adam's awakening of the mind as the "first attempt at a free choice", the "liberation" from dependence on nature and grace, the horizon of new possibilities. The man's eyes "opened", Kant points out and "[h]e stood, as it were, on the brink of an abyss; for instead of the single objects of his desire to which instinct had up to now directed him, there opened up an infinity of them /.../ and from this estate of freedom /.../ it was nevertheless wholly impossible for him to turn back again to that of servitude" (Kant 2011, 166). But let us return to Eco's Adam. After leaving Eden, Adam calms down. During the linguistic experimentation, he found that the linguistic order is not absolute, that the Order (*Ordine*) does not exist; it is only one of the infinitely possible states of repose (Eco 1984a, 102–103).

3. Eco's Semiotics

A certain pleasure in reading Eco's essay, rightly remarks Michael Caesar, is found not only in the "technical demonstration" but also in the "discrete parody"

³ In fact, it seems that Eco's semiotic project is somewhat close to Kant's philosophical project. Namely, Eco is disinterested in the question of God because, as well as Kant, he believed that it cannot be answered, thus he pushed it within the limits of semiotics or the semiotically conceived "common sense".

(present in his novels as well) of poets, literary theorists, and philosophers (Baroque, Romanticism, "concrete poetry," futurism, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Joyce, Heidegger, Barthes, Kristeva, Jakobson, Derrida, Hjelmslev) who are present in one way or another in Adam's and Eve's role as "breakneck experimenters" with forms of language and culture (Ceasar 1999, 75). More importantly – at least for this occasion – is that the biblical story of Adam and Eve served to Eco as a "practical demonstration" of the basic features of aesthetic use of language in a humorous way (how else?) based on a simple model – since complex aesthetic messages are too complicated to be precisely analysed – as well as own semiotic theories (Eco 1984a, 91). The characteristics of the aesthetic message were, therefore, the focus of Eco's interest not only because he believed that a semiotic approach to aesthetic texts could clarify much that the traditional aesthetics (especially Croce's) leave unexplained, but also because the basic characteristic of an aesthetic message (homology of expression and content) illuminates the basic tenets of his own semiotic theory.

At the very beginning of his essay, Eco engages with Roman Jakobson's claim that the aesthetic use of language is determined by ambiguity (*ambiguità*) and self-focusing character (*autoriflessività*), which he explains further. Through ambiguity, the message becomes inventive in relation to the possibilities recognized within the code. But for an aesthetic message to emerge, ambiguity is not enough just at the level of content form – where, within the formal symmetry of metonymic relations, a metaphorical substitution operates that encourages a new conception of the semantic system and the world of meaning it harmonizes. A change is needed in terms of the form of the expression as well, and that change must be significant enough to require the addressee of the message to return to the message itself as a physical entity. Thus, the addressee will detect a kind of interaction between the changes that have taken place in the form of content and in the form of expression. In this way, the aesthetic message becomes self-focused. In it, therefore, there is a kind of inseparability of content and expression (90–91). Eco is somewhat more systematic in *A Theory of Semiotics*.

Any discussion of the invention (and the question of the invention is inevitable since it is actually a question of freedom, the question of the extent to which language rules over human beings), Eco notes, inevitably leads to ambiguity, self-focusing, and idiolectal use of code (an individual code) and thus forces one to discuss the aesthetic text (Eco 1976b, 258). There are five reasons, Eco continues, as to why the aesthetic text is important to the semiotician. *First*, the aesthetic text involves a kind of manipulation of expression. *Second*, expression manipulation leads to a revision of the message content. *Third*, the indicated double operation, which creates an idiosyncratic and very original instance of the sign-function, is to an extent reflected precisely in those codes on which the aesthetic sign-function is based, thus freeing the process of changing the code. *Fourth*, the entire operation, although focused on codes, often creates a new kind of awareness of the world. *Fifth* and final, since aesthetic activity aims to be understood by the addressee (therefore the addressee engages in complex interpretive work),

the addresser must focus on possible reactions by the addressee, which means that the aesthetic text represents a network of different communicational acts that elicit very original responses (261). The aesthetic text thus represents a summary of all aspects of the sign-function.⁴ But let us return once again to Eco's story of Adam and Eve.

That story, as we have seen, is a simple model (an extremely simple language code) that shows the rules belonging to the code, the mechanisms of innovation, and possible changes to the code itself. Or, to be more precise and systematic, the model shows the core points of Eco's semiotics, revolving around the sign-function. *First*, language rules derive from the code itself, but they also (when there is a change in both expression form and content form) can lead to code changes (the model, therefore, shows the capacity of the language to generate self-contradictions). *Second*, the aesthetic use of language is the most appropriate means of creating self-contradiction. *Third*, any self-contradiction created by the aesthetic use of language at the level of its form of expression likewise includes self-contradictions at the level of the form of content, which leads to reconceptualization, i.e. a new vision of the world. *Fourth*, some solid, unchanging structure,⁵ the universal-logical realm as such does not exist (at least as far as semiotic research is concerned), but areas, axes, subsystems are organized by culture.⁶ For Eco, the role of

⁴ In rethinking Hjelmslev's notion of sign-function (solidarity between two functives: expression and content) and based on Peirce's conception of unlimited semiosis, Eco finds the following: "When code distributes elements from a conveying system to conveyed system elements system), the first becomes the expression of the second, and the second becomes the content of the first. The sign-function occurs when the expression is related to the content, and both correlated elements represent the function of such correlation." (Eco 1976b, 48) Thus, the sign-function is realized when expression and content enter into mutual correlation. The same functive can also enter into a different correlation, thus becoming a different functive that allows the creation of a new sign-function. Obviously, the classical notion of a sign dissolves into a very complex network of changing relationships. In fact, a sign, Eco argues, is not a "fixed material entity" or a "fixed semiotic entity" – meaning that "there are no signs, only sign-fund ions" (49). This then means that semiosis is self-explanatory. However, Eco notes, there are at least two cases in which semiosis is confronted with something outside of it. The first case are indications. Although he disputes Peirce's view that indications must be related to the object, they signify in order to be understood as signs, he notes that it is irrefutable to say *this* and point a finger at a given object that indications are in some way related to a unit of the extralinguistic or extrasemiotic world (115–121). The second case is the fact that each semiotic act is determined by a "dynamic object," which is "a reality that in some way manages to determine the sign of its *Representamen*." Namely, we produce *Representamen* because something outside the circle of semiosis forces us to do so. But a "dynamic object" is not an entity of the physical world, but a thought, an emotion, a movement, a feeling, a belief. This gives way to Eco's claim that a text can be interpreted independently of the intention of its creator, but it cannot be denied that the author wrote the text in accordance with his actual intention and that this intention was motivated by a "dynamic object" (or he himself was a "dynamic object") (Eco 1990, 38–39).

⁵ For Eco, structure is an "operational instrument" (*strumento operativo*) and not, as for structuralists, an "ontological reality" (*realità ontologica*) (Eco 1968, 284). By emphasising the operational role of the structure, Eco, on the one hand, sought to avoid tendencies that negate any foundation (F. Nietzsche, M. Heidegger, J. Lacan) and that he considered dangerous because they deny "common sense." On the other hand, he sought to avoid a kind of "ontology of absence," which he considered dangerous because it leads to intellectual paralysis, as he saw it in poststructuralists such as J. Derrida and M. Foucault.

⁶ Moving away from the definition of code as a set of rules toward its definition as a system of possible inferences, Eco developed the concept of an encyclopedia of rhizome-shaped culture (characterized as follows: each point is connected to each other, can be interrupted at any point and build on each other, it is antigenealogical, there is no boundary between outside and inside, it is in constant modification,

structure is clear: "Since it is absent in any case, the structure will no longer be considered the objective goal [*termina*] of the final research, but a hypothetical instrument by which phenomena can be explored before being put into broader correlations." (Eco 1968, 361) This is the foundation of semiotics which, in the words of Teresa de Lauretis, "works on systems of intersubjective cultural conventions based on social relations and history" and in which "codes are hypostasized as models of proposition that are partial, provisional, associated with changing historical circumstances and therefore 'repairable'" (De Lauretis 1981, 33).

Eco, therefore, sees the story of Adam and Eve *sub specie semiotica*. Did God introduce the ban to bring about the beginning of history? Or is God non-existent, thus the prohibition was invented by Adam and Eve to make changes to the code and start speaking in *new languages*? Or has the contradiction always been within the code, so the myth of prohibition was invented by human great-grandparents to explain such a scandalous fact? These are questions that semiotics does not ask – Eco is resolute. It is limited to the creativity of language, not its poetic use, to the interaction of world forms and semantic forms (Eco 1976a, 305–306). These are the "natural boundaries" that semiotic research cannot go beyond (1976b, 6). It is clear: Eco's thought is a "weak thought" (*pensiero debole*).

To indicate how the Adamic language is perceived in this paper, the discussion shall now set Gen 2 aside and focus on another biblical text, which – as will be showcased later – the erudite Eco knew yet did not pay much attention to. Understandably, that text (if one were to accept Eco's theory of the cooperation between the text and the reader) speaks of transcending the "boundaries", of exiting the semiotically established maze-world.

4. "Other languages"

Eco mentions the text from the second chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles* at the very end *The Search for the Perfect Language*. There, he wonders what the nature of the gift of tongues given to the apostles was. If one keeps in mind the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (12–13), Eco notes, one might think it is *glossolalia* (the ability to express oneself in an ecstatic language that everyone could understand as if it were their own). Yet, the *Acts* are about speaking in *other languages* – which means, according to Eco, that the apostles received a gift, if not for *xenoglossia* (polyglotism), then at least for a kind of mystical service of simultaneous translation. In the first case (glossolalia), the apostles were given the opportunity to speak the holy pre-Babel language, while in the second case (xenoglossia), they were given the privilege of not seeing Babel as a sign of defeat, but as the key to "a new alliance and /.../ a new concord" (Eco 1995, 351). Eco's vision corresponds to Frye's vision of a new society. Namely, the new society should be based on

it branches out in every direction, no one can describe it globally, everyone is located inside and sees only the nearest forks (Cf. Eco 1990, 143–144; Eco 1984b, 46–84; Eco 2014, 2–94).

imagination whose basic elements are words, which once formed the original language: the language of “human nature” (Frye 1963, 68).⁷ I am convinced that in “Babel” (Gen 11) and in the event of “descent of the Spirit” (Acts 2), one can discern something else: the fundamental outlines of the two communities. In the words of the author dear to Eco (St. Augustine): *Civitas terrena* and *Dei civitas*. For the first, the said author strongly argued that, if the woman with a blindfold and a scale in one hand and a sword in the other were to move away from it, it would be nothing but *magnum latrocinium* – organized brigandage (Augustin 1995, 195).

It is known that Gen 11 (the story of *confusio linguarum* – the confusion of tongues in Babel) is not always interpreted in the theological horizon in terms of the loss of the Adamic language. Hence, this paper shall refer to Miroslav Volf’s insightful interpretation. Having argued that the interpretation which sees in Acts 2 the “annulment” of the sentence from Gen 11 – although rightly linking these two texts – is not correct for either text (hereby we bypass the issue of what it means to interpret a text correctly – which Eco, I think, gave an insightful and authoritative answer to), Volf considers the story of the Tower of Babel. According to Gen 11, the people settled on a plain in Shinar and, driven by the desire to “make a name for [them]selves”, built a tower that “reaches to the heaven”. One place, one language, and one tower are the pillars of a centralized political, economic, and religious system. The biblical writer, with a measured dose of irony, writes that Yahweh “came down to see the city and the tower the people were building”. When he saw that they were “one people speaking the same language” (imperialist architects pursued a project of unification by suppressing differences that did not fit into the grand scheme), he “confused” their language and scattered the imperialist builders. Yahweh, therefore, condemned a centralized political, economic, and religious system that had universal aspirations, that sought to unite by dispelling differences, which sought to “make a name for [them]selves” by erasing a multitude of small names. Yahweh stopped the totalitarian plan of centralization, homogenization, and control. But that is not the last answer of Yahweh, claims Volf. He not only “deconstructed” false unity, but he “constructed” a new one. The Babylonian attempt to reach “heaven”, which draws everything into a centralized, totalizing community, failed. A new community is created by the “descending” of the Spirit (Volf 1996, 175).

The “descent” of the Spirit – Volf turns to the interpretation of Acts 2 – creates an alternative to the imperialist unity of the Tower of Babel. The tongues of fire separate and come to rest on each of them, and the people gathered “every nation under heaven” hear them speak “their own language”. The claim that *everyone* speaks, Volf points out, contains a critical edge: namely, even those who did not have a *voice* before now speak. As the logic of the tower sucks energy from the margin to solidify and elevate the centre, the Spirit pours power into the margin and puts the creative words of prophecy into the mouths of all (old men, chil-

⁷ Seeing Babylon as the key to a new covenant and concord is actually a call to “return to Babylon,” which corresponds to a call to “return to Egypt” by J. Assmann (Assmann 1998).

dren, servants, maids) and enables them to become the instruments of God's rule. At Pentecost, everyone was given a *voice* and was allowed to speak their own language. In "other languages", because they are equally accessible to *all*, the classification of society is destroyed (176).

Granted, there are other interpretations of glossolalia and xenoglossia (which are not based only on the interpretation of Acts 2 or 1 Cor 12–13 but are based on "charismatic experiences"). For instance, James Smith considers "tongues-speech" as a liminal case in the philosophy of language (Smith 2010, 123–150).⁸ Since, in the Anglo-American analytical tradition especially, "ordinary language" was at the centre, the phenomenon of glossolalia was bypassed, notes Smith. The reason seems obvious: glossolalia resists philosophical analysis or conceptual description. For Smith, it is precisely the "resisting" character of glossolalia that is philosophically most challenging. That the central characteristic of glossolalia is resistance is shown in two senses. *First*, it is a type of speech, that is, a speech act that resists the categories imposed by the philosophy of language. *Second*, glossolalia is a type of discourse that arises from resistance to given cultural norms and institutions (glossolalia is the language of a community that resists the existing powers). In his analysis, therefore, Smith places glossolalia not only within the framework of the philosophy of language (phenomenology – Husserl and Derrida; philosophical hermeneutics – Heidegger and Gadamer; theory of speech acts – Austin and Searle)⁹ but also ethics and social philosophy (critical theory, the "new left") (123).¹⁰ In any case, before starting a new "reading" of Acts 2 (and of other biblical texts), here is just a brief overview of the content and methodological direction.

The account of Pentecost — initially the Feast of Harvest (Ex 23:14–19) and then the memorial of the renewal of the Covenant, celebrated fifty days after the Passover — reveals that the "descent" of the Spirit enabled communication not because one language is renewed (the language with the help of which — yet not according to Eco — Adam named the true essence of things), or because a comprehensive metalanguage was created, or because a strict generative law of code was discovered, but because a new community — *the Mystical Body* — was created. Adhering to the old exegetical principle of the dual (but inseparable) meaning of biblical texts, the literal meaning (*sensus litteralis*) and the spiritual meaning (*sensus spiritualis*), wherein interpreting the latter allows interpretive freedom, which to some

⁸ Smith "puts into brackets" the theological question of whether glossolalia is the initial material record of "baptism in the name of the Spirit" — as Pentecostals claim — or simply a charismatic gift to the community, and whether glossolalia is an expression of existing languages unknown to the speaker (xenoglossia) or simply a kind of ecstatic speech (124).

⁹ Husserl's phenomenological analysis, Smith notes, raises the question: What is glossolalia? What does "speaking in tongues" mean? Hermeneutics: How to understand glossolalia? What is "spoken" in "tongues"? The theory of speech acts opens the question: What was done in glossolalia? What are the effects of glossolalia? (Smith 2010, 126).

¹⁰ J. Smith notes that glossolalia can also be considered through other perspectives, for instance, based on an analysis of the orality and literacy of Walter Ong etc. An outline for such an analysis was made by Smith in his article "The Closing of the Book: Pentecostals, Evangelical, and Sacred Writings" (Smith 1997). On semiotic theory in the context of glossolalia see: Huges 2003 and Macchia 1993.

extent means that we will stick to Eco's semiotics of literature (advocating a cooperative relationship between reader and text), I will take a look at the event of "other languages" (ἑτέραις γλώσσαις) *sub specie semiotica et corporis*.

4.1 "Other languages" *sub specie semiotica et corporis*

At the beginning of Acts 2, one reads: "Καὶ ἐν τῷ συμπληροῦσθαι" ("When the day of Pentecost was fully come"), which emphasises "fullness" (πλήρωμα). There are two complementary passages in the New Testament (Lk 9:51 and Gal 4:4) – the first is about passion and the second about incarnation – in which the "fullness of time" is emphasised (πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου). It is not, of course, a matter of the chronologically understood time, but of a soteriological economy – "the history of salvation" (Pelikan 2005, 48–49). In Acts 2, the "fullness of time" is connected with the Spirit.¹¹ The following is a description of the "descent" of the Spirit through theophanic topoi (wind, fire), followed by the description of confusion that arose among the multitude "because each one [disciple] heard their own language being spoken". There is no doubt that the depiction of a multitude, made up of different peoples (a list of Mediterranean peoples corresponding in scope to the kingdom of Alexander the Great's successor and very similar to maps and descriptions of ancient historians and geographers), evokes the following text from Isaiah:

"And I /.../ am about to come and gather the people of all nations and languages, and they will come and see my glory. I will set a sign among them [תּוֹטָא – translated as σημεῖα in *Septuaginta*, and as *signum* in *The Vulgate*], and I will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. And they will bring all your people, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD – on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels, says the LORD. They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the LORD in ceremonially clean vessels." (66:18-20)

Thus, in Acts 2, one can say that the event of "languages" is presented as *a sign* (as with Jesus's "performances" in the Gospel of John, shown as σημεῖον or *signs*, not as δύναμις or miracles). Only, it is not a sign created by the disciples to explain the "object" of faith, but a sign that is *given*. The sign, of course, immediately stimulated an interpretive process, but not *ad infinitum*.

The scene of the event "in the house" (where the disciples to be "descended" on by the Spirit were) is strangely connected to the scene of the crowd in the open. The people who made up the crowd were amazed because they "hear[d] them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues," so they asked each other, "What does this mean?" Then, in that

¹¹ V. Lossky notes that the "descent" of the Spirit is the final goal of divine economy (Lossky 1957, 159).

"outside" scene, "some" stand out from the crowd and when asked what this "language" event could be, mockingly reply: "They have had too much wine." After this ironic sting, the two scenes merge: the one in the house and the one outside. Those "inside" become interpreters to those "outside". In fact, both crowds have their own interpreters: the interpreters to those outside are "others", the interpreter to those "inside" is Peter. He, together with eleven disciples, begins a speech that connects the event of "language" with a text from Joel (3:1-5). The crowd that hears Peter's interpretation of the events of "language" is deeply shocked. This distress does not cause a state of dull silence, but raises the (pragmatic) question: "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter tells them to "repent and be baptized" so that they too might receive the gift, for "[t]he promise is both for your children and for all those who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:37–39).

Thus, the gifted sign is Yahweh's factual and semiotic judgment that instigated the semiotic phenomenon, the process of interpretation — but not in terms of unlimited semiosis. The process of interpretation soon led to a kind of *agôn* – to two interpretations. It is, therefore, an *eschatological sign* – a sign that in itself does not carry the potential infinity of possible interpretations, but a sign that is true *judgment*. To where leads an ironically based interpretation, a semiotic process that ultimately remains open (but is actually closed-off!), a semiotic that has only the explanatory and practical but not predictive power, can be seen if one compares the community residing in the *Holy City* "coming down out of heaven" (Rev 21:2) and the community that builds the Tower of Babel.¹² There is no temple in the Holy, "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Rev 21:22). The temple has been replaced by the Body! The Holy City is replaced by the Body! The Holy City – the Body – is permanently open: "On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there", but "[n]othing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful" (Rev 21:25–27). At the center of the Holy City – the Body – is the "tree of life" (Rev 22: 2). No serpent, no apple, no command, no taboo. It is entered by faith. In it, "other languages" are spoken. It is a perichoretic community.

Even if one does not understand it (like Volf, for example) as the aspiration to make a name, that is, as a hegemonic endeavour and a creation of totalitarian universalism, but (like Eco) as the key to "a new alliance and /.../ a new concord" (Eco 1995, 351), the event of the construction of the Tower of Babel shows that communication outside the *Body* – whether based on one language or on different languages – is impossible. It is clear that where hegemonic processes rule, where individuals are uniform, and where one language is desirable, mutual communication becomes a self-contradiction. The idea of a community in which the

¹² General semiotics, Eco points out, does not explain phenomena, it offers a framework within which phenomena gain coherence, hence it has explanatory and practical power, it can change the world, but not predict (Eco 1984b, 11).

triumph of total polyglotism is not celebrated, but in which people can recognise the atmosphere of another speech, in which people can meet each other by speaking each their own tongue and understanding that of others, based on a “comparative instrument” which in turn is based on unlimited semiosis – I guess it is clear: it is an illusion. *Lingua edenica* – a language that encompasses all languages, a language that existed *ab initio* and in which all others were contained (352) – is a mere hypothetical language, a language of a kind of formal logic that provides tools to the define infinitely possible forms of the world and to helps us navigate the maze-word – but only in certain moments. To get out of the maze, one needs the *original sign*.

5. Instead of a conclusion – “Other languages” as the language of the Other

In reflecting on the “essence of language” (in the “vicinity” of singing and thinking), Heidegger referred precisely to the description of the “descent” of the Spirit (Acts 2:3-4). He pointed out that speaking in the biblical text was not meant as a “mere facility of the tongue” (*bloße Zungenfertigkeit*), but as speaking filled with the Holy Spirit (Heidegger 1971, 97). He then included a passage from the beginning of Aristotle’s *Περὶ ἑρμηνείας* (*On Interpretation*) in which utterance (λόγος) is presented as articulated speech. It is a classic place: letters are signs of voices, voices are signs of mental experiences, mental experiences are signs of things. Everything is connected through the relationship of signs. We, Heidegger notes, act too harshly when we talk about signs without further definition, about something that signifies something else and shows it in a certain way (namely, Aristotle himself, with the word σημεῖα [*semeia*] uses both σύμβολα [*symbola*] and ὁμοιώματα [*homoiomata*]) – with which Eco, and I hope from what I have written so far it is now clear, agrees. Then comes what seems pertinent to me. Heidegger argues that metaphysical thinking has obscured – that of the “bodily language” (*Leibhafte der Sprache*), ringing, vibrating of language (98). And while Heidegger develops from the “corporeality of language” the idea of language as the utterance of speech (which was developed into a theological concept by Ernest Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling), and Eco develops the understanding of the aesthetic message,¹³ Acts 2 – actually the Bible and Christian tradition – they make one think, more precisely know the “corporeality of language” (after all, the corporeality itself) in a completely different way, both beyond metaphysics and beyond Heidegger and Eco (and Nietzsche and Nancy).

The “descending” Spirit is not some cultural universe that everyone expresses by speaking the language of their ancestors (Eco 1995, 351), nor some *anima*

¹³ The basic characteristic of which is, once more, shaping a signifying sequence, whereby changes in content are homologous to changes in substance of expression, the very tissue of the matter of which signifying forms are composed – ambiguous about the rules of code as a system that codifies and therefore leads to the creation of new semantic worlds.

mundi, nor a formal constitutive principle of the universe, a stage in the dialectical development of "idea" (Hegel), or even just that for which we cannot say that it is, but that it has (*Es gibt Sein*), which is not in the way of being, but in the way of revealing, of bringing to non-concealment, into language (Heidegger). Because the Spirit is not all that is mentioned, he "descends".¹⁴ He is the "Spirit of truth" (πνευμα της αληθείας, Jn 16:13): the adequacy of the body (of Jesus) and God (the Father) – *adaequatio Iesū et Dei*. He is, we may say, the Spirit-Body, the body of Jesus of Nazareth extended to infinity. The "descent" of the Spirit is, therefore, the event of becoming the "one Body" of Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples – *mystici corporis Christi*.¹⁵ It is precisely "one Body," the Mystical Body, which is the original sign, a sign that is not grounded within semiotic discourse. The original sign is not understood, therefore, as a sign by relating it to another sign (*inter-preter*) within a sign system (code), it is not a "dynamic object", but, to use the semiotic nomenclature for a moment, a kind of the ultimate Code. But – the Mystical Body is not an arch-code that determines, but a code of freedom, a code that generates "other languages" (ἑτέρας γλώσσας) – and thus a *communion* that is not a multi-ethnic or multilingual, but a Catholic community.

"Other languages" are not, therefore, languages that arise *ad placitum*, languages generated by the poetic invention. "Other languages" are not some *energeia*, a spiritual process (W. von Humboldt), nor they are the transmission of the corporeal in words (F. Nietzsche), nor do languages that arise from some outpouring of the creative spirit, nor they are languages of from imagination free of any constraints, nor they spring from the unconscious, nor they are a pulsive state of humming (R. Barthes), mumbling, swaying (M. Foucault), nor languages of the "semiotic order" (J. Kristeva). "Other languages" are not a language of set-up, nor a language by which one can discern some solid internal form. "Other languages" are erotic language, a language that arises from the mystical union of two bodies, the language of the birth of a new body. It is the language spoken by Adam in Eden, the prophetic poetry that expresses a deep somatic homology – the oneness of two:

"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man." (Gen 2:23)

"Other languages" are actually an *organon* of invocation to the very "essence" of a thing – which is not a mere thing (an extralinguistic object, a mere entity of

¹⁴ The Church has rejected Giordano Bruno's teachings that the Spirit is a formal constitutive principle of the universe and Abelard's "Quod Spiritus Sanctus sit anima mundi" (Dupré 1992, 59; 62).

¹⁵ N. Nissiotis describes the "descent" of the Spirit as an event in which the chosen people of God, the Body of Christ, become the *koinonia* of the Spirit. The body of the Son of Man thus, Nissiotis points out, revealed an inspiring grace and became the omnipresent Spirit (Nissiotis 1963, 488). S. Chan takes over the ecclesiological thought of *Christus totus* and notes that it was at Pentecost that the people of God united with Christ, the Head, in such a way that the Body of Christ was created: the Church (Chan 2011, 58–59).

the physical world) or something prelinguistically determined (mind, spirit), but a Mystical Body, a *communion of bodies* and *Word-Body* (*logos-sarx*): the one Body (1 Jn 1:1-4). Here, it is worth referring to the thought of Joseph Ratzinger: “When Adam names the animals, what this means is not that he indicates their essential natures, but that he fits them into his human world, puts them within reach of his call” (Ratzinger 2007, 133).

Unlike Adam, the heretic Salvatore from *The Name of the Rose*, spoke a kind of mother tongue, taking the words intermittently from one and the other language:

“Penitenziagite! Watch out for the draco who cometh in futurum to gnaw your anima!

Death is super nos! Pray the Santo Pater come to liberar nos a malo and all our sin! Ha ha, you like this negromanzia de Domini Nostri Jesu Christi! Et anco jois m’es dols e plazer m’es dolors. /.../ Cave el diabolo! Semper lying in wait for me in some angulum to snap at my heels. But Salvatore is not stupidus! Bonum monasterium, and aquí refectorium and pray to dominum nostrum. And the resto is not worth merda. Amen. No?” (Eco 1980, 31)

Such a language – a kind of mother tongue, a language that is not a single language but a complex of all languages actually corresponds to the Kabbalistic pan-semiotic idea of creating a world that is far from *creatio ex nihilo* by Yahweh’s word (Gen 1). Even when he does not speak it, but only holds that it is a hypothetical language, man is, I believe, *insipiens*.

That the Mystical Body is an original sign is not hereby determined by way of a hypothetical conjecture (abduction), but by *faith* in the one (more accurately, perhaps, by faith *within* the one, because it is not something that exists on its own, which is given externally) who is the Word-Body. Thus, the faith meant here is not a mere “dynamic object;” it is trust in the One who *knows* the answers to questions that semiotics does not ask and hence actually (alas!) pushes them into a subculture that generates various fundamentalisms. For the Word-Body, the evangelist Luke says that it is – σημείον ἀντιλεγόμενον (a sign that will be spoken against) (2:34), which *The Vulgate* translates as *signum cui contradicetur*, therefore, *la stessa cosa*: “a sign disputed” or “a sign to be contradicted”, because it generates “other languages”, languages that cannot be semiotically typologized, languages that elude even the interpretations of languages based on the postulate of matching metaphysics, logic, and grammar (elaborated by scholasticism in the treatise *de modis significandi*), the romantic idea of *Sprache als Weltansicht* (which in some linguistic corresponds with Eco’s *lingua edenica*) and all post-Nietzschean philosophies of language based on the belief that language is not a reflection, but an illusion. “Other languages” are the languages of the Other – the *call* of the Other!

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