

Autocommunication, Negative Influence and Cross-Cultural Studies

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Abstract

This paper aims to interpret Jurij Lotman's concept of autocommunication in terms of the trite theme of 'negative influence' in cross-cultural studies. By situating retroactively Lotman in the historical context of the 1970s when the research field of influence study was undergoing heated debate, the paper fills in a missing link of the reception of Lotman by Anglo-American and Chinese readerships in the early and the middle 1970s. The paper argues that with regard to his own revision of Roman Jakobson's model of communication, Lotman demonstrates reflexively and bears witness to the phenomenon of 'negative influence', where the recipient at once adopts and rebukes his sources. The paper raises and attempts to answer the following set of pertinent questions: (1) What 'negative influence' is; (2) How 'negative influence' can be recast in the Jakobsonian model of speech communication; (3) How 'negative influence' can be reinterpreted in terms of 'autocommunication' or the other way around; (4) What implications 'autocommunication' has in the writing of national and transnational literary historiography.

Keywords: negative influence, autocommunication, Jakobson, Lotman, cross-cultural studies

1. Autocommunication as a Mechanism of Negative Influence

This paper aims to interpret Jurij Lotman's thorny concept of autocommunication in terms of the trite theme of 'negative influence' in comparative literature and cross-cultural studies. I shall raise and attempt to answer three related questions: (1) What is 'negative influence'? (2) How 'negative influence' can be recast in the Jakobsonian model of speech communication? (3) How 'negative influence' can be reinterpreted in terms of 'autocommunication'? (4) What implications 'autocommunication' has in the writing of national / transnational literary historiography?

Chang (1992, 2000, 2008) appropriates Roman Jakobson's speech communication model and expands it—albeit with a qualitative leap, to discuss Chinese scholars' receptions of (1) John Dewey's pragmatism and (2) Wilhelm Windleband's historiography of philosophy in the early 20th century, and (3) American New Criticism in the 1970s as instances of negative influence. The present paper attempts, among other things, to negotiate negative influence with Lotman's model of autocommunication.

2. What Is 'Negative Influence'?

'Negative influence' is a term popularised among comparative literature scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. It refers to [the concept of] the phenomenon of literary reception in which the recipient, rather than being influenced to produce works similar to the model, reacts against his/her foreign source in the manner of counter imitation. A famous example is Bertolt Brecht's *Gegenentwurf* ('counter-design') through which the playwright distorts his models intentionally and polemically. There have been a few other terms used to refer to 'negative influence'. For example, Paul Valéry refers to it as 'l'influence à rebours' (Pistorius, 1966), and André Gide as 'l'influence par protestation' (Laurette, 1966), and the most famous is probably Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' (Bloom, 1975). Alternatively, in the Slavonic tradition, Viktor M. Zhirmunsky quotes Veseolovsky in describing convergent literary currents as '*vstrechnye techeniya*' ('courants de rencontre') (1967, 1969). This tradition is carried over by the Slovakian D. Ďurišin who uses the term 'convergent currents' (1984) in his configuration of interliterary process.

All the cited variations suggest the concept is founded on the metaphor of water flow. And the etymology of 'influence' (*in-fluere*) and 'influx' suggests the direction of information flow from a 'source' to a 'flow-in' receptacle, an archaic 'metalingual' top-down movement, *pace* Lotman, and, conceptualised in typography, a left to right horizontal movement. To rebuke Bloom's metaphor of water flow, Thomas McFarland (1984) reinstates the meaning of astrology in that celestial bodies affect human beings, which is nonetheless still registered in a top-down movement. Furthermore, the metaphor of 'current' or 'convergent currents' suggests the possibility of two-way flow and is congenial to the Lotmanian dialectics of autocommunication and dialogisation.

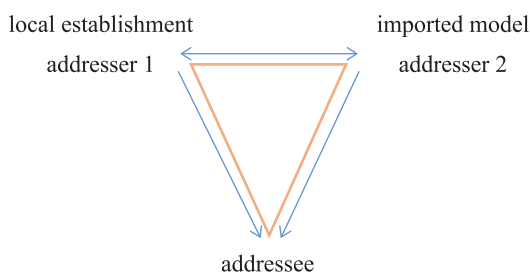
Scholars have identified two types of negative influence. First, negative influence occurs when the Addressee 'misreads' the Addresser's Message. Granting that all reading is misreading, one can make a provisional distinction here between 'intentional' and 'unintentional' misreadings. The intentional misreading is done with a polemic thrust by the Addressee as post-processor in order to negate the influence of his model (text 1); the result (text 2) of his transcoding often appears as a parody or the afore-mentioned Brechtian counter-design of the original. The unintentional misreading takes place when the Addressee, often a post-processing mediator, lacks sufficient linguistic and literary competence to 'reconstruct' the Addresser's code.

Under such circumstances, the mediator's (addressee 1 = addresser 2) transcoded

product (e.g., translations as text 2) would engender for addressee 2 a mirage of text 1. This happens to be the case of mainland China’s reception of John Dewey in the 1920s and Taiwan’s reception of American New Criticism in the late 1960s.

The second definition of negative influence involving two literary systems is more relevant to our discussion. Addressee 1 (agent or mediator) introduces into his own culture a foreign model (text 1), often adulterated through transcoding (text 2), as a challenge to his immediate predecessors or conservatives in his own literary tradition. A triangle down below is thus formed. In this instance, what addressee 1 rebels against is his own literary heritage, rivalry or the dominating ‘normal science’ rather than his transcoded model (text 1). A notable example took place in Taiwan in the early 1970s, where the traditionalists (addressee 2) and the mediators (addressee 1 = agent = addresser 2) of the New Critical method staged a keen fight in the academy. The relationship can be shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1



3. A Rehearsal of Jakobson’s Communication Model

As Lotman’s autocommunication has been regarded as a revision and modification of Jakobson’s model of communication, a brief rehearsal of Jakobson (1960) and his critics will be in order.

Figure 2. Jakobson’s communication model

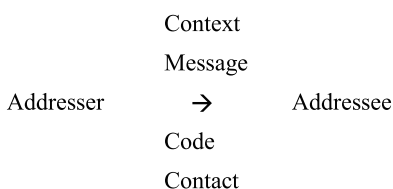
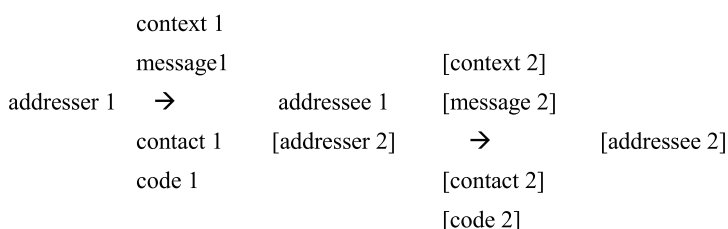


Figure 3. Chang’s expansion of Jakobson’s model



Where addressee 1 is identical to addresser 2 in post-processing, and there is interlingual transcoding from code 1 to code 2, e.g., from English to Chinese.

Jakobson's scheme has been constantly modified, for critics assert that it either fails to reflect the reality of communication (Eco, 1976, 1979) or fails to account for the socio-economic dimensions of 'contact' and the institutional force of 'context', both being instrumental in making successful communication possible (Even-Zohar, 1990). Even though Jakobson stresses that the model is dynamic and the six elements involved are mutually interactive, and therefore the arrows are not uni-directional, critics tend to read the information processing horizontally from left to right. I shall now identify three critics who have attempted to modify Jakobson: Umberto Eco, Siegfried J. Schmidt and Lotman.

According to Eco (1976), the Addressee's interpretation is affected by several 'aberrant' factors, including his private codes and ideological biases. Besides, the 'real patrimony' of the Addressee's knowledge is not the knowledge he supposedly shares with the Sender. Therefore, the decoded text (message-content) is not expected to coincide with the encoded text (message-expression). This is especially true in cross-cultural communication. As Eco puts it, 'Sometimes the addressee's entire system of cultural units (as well as the concrete circumstances in which he lives) legitimate[s] an interpretation that the sender would have never foreseen' (p. 141). Other times, the Sender's message is received as noise which produces a new culture (p. 142).

That the Addresser and the Addressee would encode and decode differently the same 'text'—a better word would be Schmidt's KOMMUNIKATE (1980, p. 532)—is due to the different modes of action organised in their respective LITERATURE-systems. As Schmidt puts it, 'Any recipient constructs his own KOMMUNIKAT related to a given TEXT in a receptional situation' (1980, p. 534). This testifies to what Schmidt describes as literature's polyvalence convention (1980, p. 543; 1983, p. 28). By virtue of this convention, the Addresser is deprived of his control over his KOMMUNIKAT so that it can be prevented from being appropriated first as a TEXT and then as another KOMMUNIKAT, and the Addressee is able to enjoy the freedom of post-processing his own KOMMUNIKAT.

Now what have Eco and Schmidt in common? Both Eco and Schmidt—two randomly picked up samples—focus on the Addressee's decoding process, testifying to the change of critical climate from the text to the role of the reader in the 1970s.

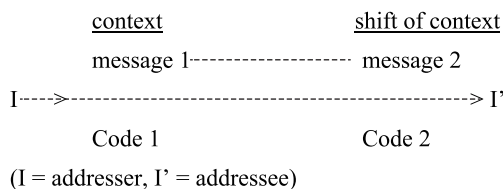
As seen in Fig. 3, 'negative influence' can be assessed only in terms of addresser 2's transcoding of message 1 into message 2; thus the relationship is intertextual rather than interpersonal or psychical on the part of addresser 2, let alone that of addresser 1.

4. Lotman's Revision of Jakobson

Lotman departs from Jakobson and comments on his axis: 'The model of ideal understanding [between addresser and addressee] does not even apply to man's internal

communication with himself since the latter situation implies the transfer of an intense dialogue within a single personality.’ He has provided a revised model to illustrate this kind of international communication as follows.

Figure 4. Lotman’s internal communication model (Lotman, 1990, 2001, Shukman’s translation)



However, Lotman’s revision requires scrutiny preferably in terms of and in relation to Jakobson. A few observations can be made here. Firstly, Addresser and Addressee are not real entities, but are functions which can receive nominal and pronominal, semantic and ideological investments, including the rare case of the split personality ‘I’ – ‘I’. Secondly, substituting the pronominal ‘I’ and ‘I’ for Addresser and Addressee does not necessarily constitute self-communication. All the six functions in Jakobson are abstractions and should be understood as such in the theoretical and irreducible sense. The fallacy of pluralisation of abstractions is seen not only in the pronominal ‘I’ but also in ‘Code’ and ‘Message’. Thirdly, Jakobson does not use Text, but we may take it to mean Message + Code or ‘Encoded Message’. In actual performance, a text may be framed in one code, or several, when the code is composite, multiple, hybridised but dividable into a number of (a hierarchy of) subcodes. Code as a function in the model is not to be confused with this or that code as a specific linguistic entity. Likewise, a message can be doubly and trebly encoded, but it remains once and for all coded.

The same can be said of Context and Message. The fact that Context in the model performs primarily the referential function does not mean that the word ‘Context’ can be pluralised. Therefore, there cannot be ‘contextual displacement’ because whatever it means, it belongs to the function of Context. Nor does Message transmit purely ‘referential’ information only; any additional layers of information, ‘emotive’, ‘phatic’, ‘conative’, ‘poetic’, ‘metalingual’ join to constitute information *in toto*, as has been confirmed by recent advances in Cognitive Science. Thus, the distinction between message 1 and message 2 is redundant unless a message is differently decoded as two messages by readers.

5. Types of Lotmanian Autocommunication

To clarify Lotman’s use of autocommunication, I have initially identified six types and shall discuss them in their order of appearance. The six types are listed below.

- 1) Monologue as ‘internal’ communication;

- 2) Communication which exhibits the tension of ‘I’ as a pronoun and ‘I’ as a proper name;
- 3) ‘I-I’ communication where the second ‘I’ is distanced as an ‘other’, a third party [s/he] or a ‘you’ because of the temporal-spatial disjunction;
- 4) Communication of dual-structure which combines an explicit message [that transmits] information and a syntagm deprived of semantic features but reflective of the hidden consciousness [unconscious?];
- 5) Communication of dual-structure with an explicit vocal code and a telegraphic, cryptic written code;
- 6) Communication which resides in the nature of language itself: the tension between semantics and syntax [syntagm in Lotman] in the process of signification.

The simplest (and simplistic) type of autocommunication is no doubt monologue where one communicates with oneself. A beautiful statement of Louis Hjelmslev’s [unfortunately in English translation] reads: ‘[Language] is also the ultimate, indispensable sustainer of the human individual, his refuge in hours of loneliness, when the mind wrestles with existence and the conflict is resolved in the monologue of the poet and the thinker’ (Hjelmslev, 1970, p. 3). When introducing autocommunication, Lotman cites from Goethe’s *Faust*: ‘Two souls, alas! reside within my breast, / And each withdraws from, and repels, its brother’ (Lotman, 2004, pp. 4-5). But when two souls are engaged, are they not using ‘dialogue’ rather than ‘monologue’, as evidenced by the popular medieval genre of dialogue of body and soul? Here Lotman is dealing with an entirely different issue from Jakobson’s. It may touch upon the Addresser-oriented emotive and phatic functions and the Addressee-oriented conative function of language. More probably, it addresses the Addresser’s ‘double-articulation’ of ‘poetic’ language in a rhetorical (denotative versus connotative) and psychoanalytical (manifest versus latent) sense.

Jakobson’s model, which presupposes two *actants* performed, in principle, by two *acteurs*, may apply to the Addresser’s autocommunication only when the reified Addresser (as *acteur*) has undergone a personality split, i.e., one *acteur* assuming the functions of two *actants*, performing respectively on the manifest code and the latent code. Solipsism put aside, monologue, however, is always already socialised; it is part of sociolect, rather than an idiolect which Jakobson treats as a ‘perversion’. Apart from monologue, an obvious instance of autocommunication can be an author’s constantly revised and recanted autobiographical writings, as in the case of St. Augustine and William Butler Yeats.

The second type of autocommunication exhibits the tension of ‘I’ as a pronoun and ‘I’ as a proper name. Lotman cites Rousseau as saying: ‘The [first] “I” in *Emile* is a pronoun designating he who expresses the essence of discourse in the first person.’ This ‘I’ can be transferred to others and pluralised [into a ‘we’] through the shifters (cf. Jakobson). But the ‘I’ in *Confessions* amounts to a proper name [like ‘Jean-Jacques’] in that it is unique: ‘I am not made like any one I have seen; I dare believe I am not made like any one existing’ (2004). Lotman further observes that ‘The structure of the ‘I’ is one of the basic

indices of culture' (ibid.) and sees this aporia of 'I' has given rise to a new type of artistic consciousness. That the first-person narrator undergoes, as it were, a personality split into the historical personage ('Jean-Jacques Rousseau') and a fictional persona ('Emile'), or even a voice evoking and nominating 'I' (in Saussure's words, '*le sujet parlant*') is a modernist commonplace. An enquiry into the narrative voice or point-of-view has to be distinguished from the semantics of proper noun in the tradition of F. L. Gottlob Frege, P. F. Strawson and Saul Kripke. In fact, as an indexical sign, 'I' does not 'represent' a proper noun even though it 'evokes' a speaking subject and, for that matter, an infinite number of shifting speaking subjects ('*une masse parlante*'), thus occasioning *la parole* (Saussure) and *le discours* (Émile Benveniste). It has nothing to do with 'naming'.

In 'I-I' communication, the second 'I' is distanced as an 'other', a third party ('he' / 'she') or a 'you' because of the temporal-spatial disjunction. The argument that 'in "I-s/he" system information is transferred in space, in the "I-I" system it is transferred in time' does not hold true (Lotman, 2001, p. 21), both systems being characterised by time and space disjunction. 'I' is a deictics, evoking the speaking subject; it's not even a signifier that closes on a signified. The famous quote from Rimbaud '*Je est un autre*' points out the arbitrariness of the pronoun, not renders the evoked subject into an otherwise substantial *other*, as in '*Je suis un autre*'. What makes sense in 'I-I' communication is the self-reflexivity of certain statements, oriented to the Code, thus serving the 'metalingual' (plus poetic) function identified by Jakobson.

This last critique in terms of metalingual function serves to explain, if explain away, Lotman's communication of dual-structure, which manifests in three types. First, communication which combines an explicit 'message' [not in the Jakobsonian sense] and a syntagm deprived of semantic features amounts to Jakobson's 'poetry of grammar'. It's a problem of Code which serves the metalingual function. Second, communication with an explicit vocal code and a telegraphic, cryptic written code can only be a problem of Code and also serves the metalingual function. And third, communication which resides in the nature of language itself: the tension between semantics and syntax [syntagm in Lotman] in the process of signification is a coding problem *par excellence*, cf. Jakobson's two poles of language, the metaphorical and the metonymical, from Saussure's *rappports associatifs* and *rappports syntagmatiques* (Saussure, 1968, pp. 170-175).

6. What Can Lotman Teach Us About Negative Influence?—Dialogue Reconsidered

Lotman's reading of Jakobson bears witness to the force of 'negative influence'. One theoretical implication of my case studies is the production of new knowledge when cultures clash. This is evidenced by the triangular relationships among domestic establishments, revolutionaries, and imported foreign models, where two kinds of 'negative influence' are in operation. Whilst the interlocutors are engaged in heated debate, the third party from abroad invariably serves as a catalyst for 'explosion'. For this, we should once

again turn to Lotman on dialogue rather than autocommunication.

One of the theoretical implications of Lotman's semiosphere is its significance in cross-cultural studies. Among the cultural mechanisms which Lotman and his colleagues have identified, dialogue and translation figure prominently. With Lotman, dialogue as well as translation—in their continued process of emission and transmission of energy—can be enacted not only between historical periods of one culture, but also between intercultural and cross-cultural systems. According to Lotman, dialogue is characterised by the discreteness of language and asymmetry in communication. Where the interlocutors alternate in give-and-take, each is capable of articulating only his discrete share of discourse, perhaps only one tiny fraction at a time. The discreteness is constituted not only by moments of articulation, but also by moments of silence because when one locutor speaks and sends information, the other has to remain silent and becomes temporarily an allocutor whose job is to decode the message s/he receives.

Since natural language is by nature unstable and subject to the caprice of temporality, the information flow is often asymmetrical and perfect communication is thus impossible. As natural language is the primary modelling system, on top of which is the secondary modelling system of culture, the phenomenon of interpreting culture becomes all the more difficult. This is especially the case in cross-cultural communication because each of the two parties involved has its own definition of culture, its own boundaries of the legitimate texts that constitute culture as well as exclude the so-called non-culture. As dialogue of cultures is inevitable in a culture's historical evolution, such dialogue serves, curiously, a special function of its own dialogue or, in Lotman's words, autocommunication.

Lotman projects the dialogic discreteness onto the history of a culture, where the interlocutors cease to be the indigenous versus the exogenous, because both have already been fused as historical products, but are displaced by two historical moments which engage each other in dialogue, or are charged with the semiotic task of infinite process of encoding and decoding. An example is the dialogue between a turbulent, productive moment and its relatively calm and inert-looking but fully saturated counterpart. In this sense, the autocommunication of a culture which is no longer a self-sufficient entity in itself amounts to the perennial Gadamarian self-dialogue that characterizes cultural hermeneutics. This is perhaps an alternative solution to the thorny problem of cross-cultural dialogue with which we are all concerned.

Put in the Chinese contexts of the 1920s and 1970s, the traditionalists' vehement reactions to introduced models force the recipients of foreign models to engage in some kind of autocommunication between two domestic camps. Only in this extended metaphorical sense and through the macroscopic perspective can autocommunication be appropriated as a model to study cross-cultural reception studies. A profound semiotician and cultural historian, Lotman continues to shed light on our disciplines of comparative literature and semiotics of culture with his insight into the possibility of intercultural dialogue.

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