

The Babushka Principle in Semiotics: Connotation, Motivation, and Metatheory

Summary. In this chapter, we introduce the idea of what we call the *semiotic Babushka Principle* (sign systems within sign systems) presented by Louis Hjelmslev. We discuss the implications of applying this principle to the analysis of music and musical scores. We argue that, through the conceivably infinite mapping of connotational systems, music is capable of accomplishing significant symbolic depth.

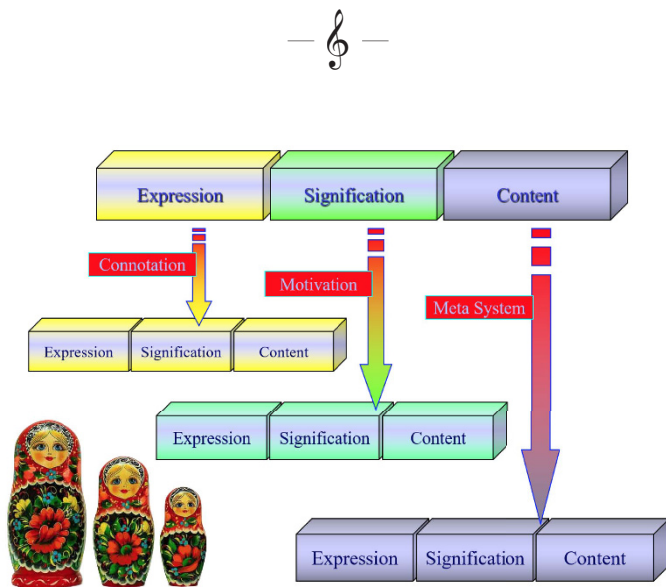


Fig. 10.1: Hjelmslev's ramifications of a semiotic system into connotation, motivation, and metasystem.

As we have seen in Chapter 6, expression, signification, and content are the basic components of meaningful signs and symbols. However, it is somewhat

ambiguous which part of a signs corresponds to which step in the process. For example (Figure 10.2), you might say that the expression of the word “firework” is the written word itself, the signification being the understanding of the word, and the content being noise, light, and color. However, your friend may suggest that the noise and color associated with firework are the expression, where as a connotative meaning such as “Fourth of July” may make up the content.

In reality, neither of you are wrong. Rather, you are operating on different levels of symbolism. The role of connotation, brought up by your hypothetical friend (we realize that your friends probably don’t casually have conversations about semiotics) was actually first brought up by Louis Hjelmslev. Hjelmslev’s Babushka Principle is the idea that, through connotation, one part of a sign system can become a sign system of its own, resulting in a possibly infinite systems of signs systems within sign systems.

The Babushka Principle is exemplified by the expansion of the original three components to a sign system—expression, signification, and content (see Figure 10.1 for a visual representation). An expansion of the expressive dimension is called *connotation*, while expansion in the signification dimension is called *motivation* and in the dimension of content is called *meta system*. Figure 10.1 shows these ramifications, and Figure 10.2 shows the connotational double articulation in language.

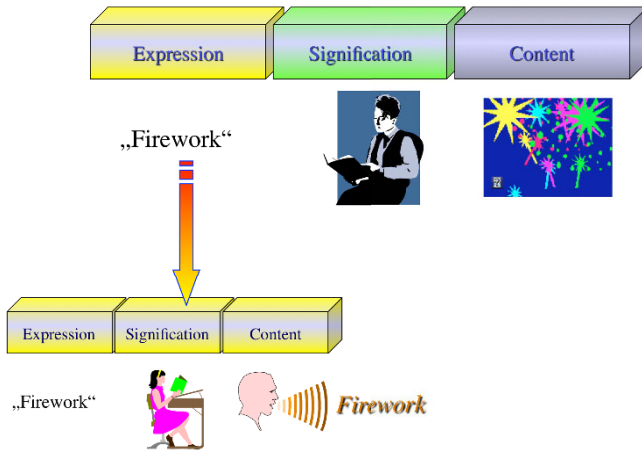


Fig. 10.2: Double articulation in language, a connotative structure. It extends Figure 6.1.

For example, let us look at how a musician perceives, analyzes, and performs a score, see Figure 10.3. The first sign system that we may conceive is that consisting of the score’s text, the reading of the score, and the conception of the score by the composer (expression, signification, and content respectively). However, this entire sign system only accounts for the perception of music,

ignoring the importance of analysis and performance. The semiotic nature of music does not end there, but the first sign system in itself is complete.

In order to solve this issue, we must also be aware of a second sign system involved with score analysis, including the conception of the score, the musician's analysis, and the form the music takes in the composer's mind after analyzing it (again, expression, signification, and content respectively). This sign system is a connotational system of the original sign system. That means that it takes the content of the first system (i.e. the conceived score) as an expressive level, and expands it into a sign system of its own. Similarly, we can say that the original sign system is a connotation of the second sign system, because it takes the expression (i.e. the conceived score) and expands it into a sign system of its own.

This process of condensing and expanding sign systems is responsible for the translation of the score into a performance, and ultimately to the listener's interpretation of the performance (see Figure 10.3). One can even argue that sign systems underly the way in which a society views a piece of music or a certain performer. Such an assertion is reminiscent of the psychological concept of schema formation, in which individuals form an understanding of something new through activating an intricate, underlying web of connections of related concepts. The convergence of these theories lends support to their validity.

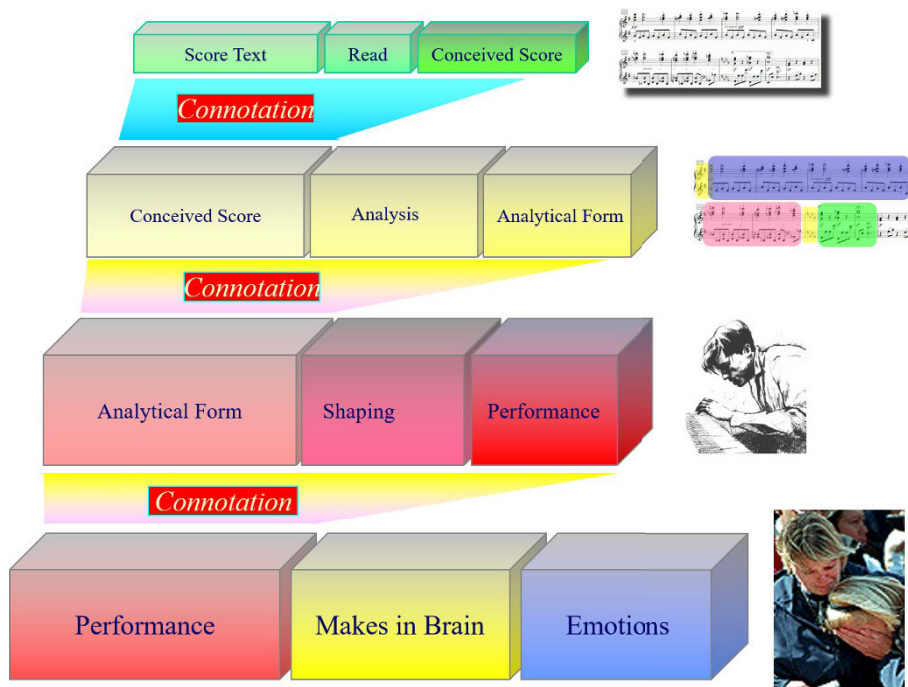


Fig. 10.3: The multiply connotational imbrication of a musical performance.