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Aberrant Decoding and Its Linguistic Expression (An Attempt to Restore the Original Concept)

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Abstract

The terminological phrase aberrant decoding and its related concept were launched by Umberto Eco in a study on semiotics regarding television. Originally published in Italian in 1965, the study was later translated and published in English in 1972. Since then, the term aberrant decoding (in ital.: decodifica aberrante) has circulated and been taken over especially by communication sciences. One of those who have greatly contributed to the spread of the term / concept in question was John Fiske, a prominent Anglo-Saxon specialist in communication and a great promoter of Communication and Cultural Studies. Undoubtedly, the concept of «aberrant decoding» has proven itself useful in intercultural communication, a subject on the rise nowadays. However, we have found that (due to J. Fiske, mainly) the concept in question is applied in a reductionist manner, the linguistic / verbal component being neglected (or even ignored) in this case. Nevertheless, as we shall see, this was not U. Eco’s intention. In this study, we aim at re-evaluating the concept of «aberrant decoding» behind the term aberrant decoding, trying to restore its original meaning and define it more precisely. At the same time, we will try to prove the fact that linguistic aberrant decoding also appears in the case of terminologies and ideologies when they are expressed in a discourse.

Keywords: aberrant decoding; semiotics; linguistics; communication studies; terminology; ideology
1. Introduction

The term aberrant decoding and its corresponding concept (further noted as «aberrant decoding») have been introduced by Umberto Eco in a study on semiotics and it mainly referred to the message transmitted by television. Initially published in Italian, in 1965, the respective study was later translated in English in 1972. From that moment on, the term aberrant decoding (in Italian: decodifica aberrante) started to be used, mostly in communication studies. John Fiske was one of the linguists who highly contributed to the dissemination of the term / concept. He is a famous specialist in communication and pioneer of the Communication and Cultural Studies trend. Obviously, the term itself proved useful in the researches on media studies, intercultural communication, etc. Because we observed that (mainly due to John Fiske) the term aberrant decoding is applied in a reductionist way, since the verbal component of communication is neglected (or even ignored), we find it appropriate to resort to U. Eco’s essay, to see how the term aberrant decoding was first used.

Thus, in this study, we aim at:
• re-evaluating the concept «aberrant decoding» beyond the term aberrant decoding, while trying to give it its original meaning;
• better defining this concept, with an emphasis on the importance of «context» in the case when such a type of decoding occurs;
• proving the importance of verbal communication as compared to non-verbal communication;
• showing (in spite of what John Fiske stated) that, in the case of verbal communication, the phenomenon of aberrant decoding is not accidental, but quite frequent.

2. Anglo-Saxon reception of the concept «aberrant decoding»

We will start by presenting the way in which the concept «aberrant decoding» was received in the Anglo-Saxon scientific community. Since we also aim at making a critical analysis of what John Fiske and John Hartley said, we will quote in extenso some paragraphs that belong to these authors.

2.1. A first entry of «aberrant decoding» in a dictionary of concepts

Referring to the term aberrant decoding in a dictionary of “key concepts in communication and cultural studies”, John Fiske states that “this is a term used by Eco (1965) to describe what happens when a message that has been encoded according to one code is decoded by means of another” [1].

Next, John Fiske makes a synthesis of the types of aberrant decoding listed by Eco, briefly giving some of the latter’s examples (even if adapted sometimes, as we will later see). Aberrant decoding is said to “range from the ignorance of the original codes (as when the Achaean conquerors misinterpreted Cretan symbols) to the overlay or imposition of later codes upon a message (as when early Christians overlaid a Christian meaning upon a pagan symbol or ritual, or when post-romantic scholars find erotic images in what an earlier poet conceived of as philosophical allegories)” [2].

However, the concept can be best applied to the contemporary mass-media. Due to the great variety of cultures and subcultures which interconnect in this field, the cases of aberrant decoding are very frequent. That is why J. Fiske approves of U. Eco, according to whom “the aberrant decoding is the rule in the mass-media”.

2.2. A second entry of «aberrant decodings» in a dictionary of concepts

John Hartley, one of the five co-authors of the dictionary of concepts afore mentioned, also wrote, as single author, a similar dictionary entitled Communication, Cultural and Media Studies. The Key Concepts. Here, the concept «aberrant decoding» is more precisely and extensively treated than in J. Fiske’s dictionary entry. After defining the concept in question as “a mismatch of meaning between sender (encoder) and receiver (decoder) of
any message, from ancient art to contemporary media”, John Hartley [3] also draws a classification, a “simplified” one (only four classes), of the different types of aberrant decoding identified by U. Eco:

- people who didn’t know the language (what meanings did the Greeks, and then everyone till Jean-François Champollion, ascribe to Egyptian hieroglyphics?);
- people from future generations (what meanings did medieval Christians ascribe to Greek and Roman art?);
- people from different belief systems (what meanings do tourists ascribe to the stained glass windows of cathedrals such as Chartres?);
- people from different cultures (what meanings do white people ascribe to Aboriginal art?)” [4].

John Hartley also mentions the way in which U. Eco’s concept came to be used: “Eco’s article was translated (by Paola Splendore) and published in the journal of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), Working Papers in Cultural Studies, in 1972. It was a source of influence for Stuart Hall’s ‘encoding / decoding’ thesis and for much subsequent work by media researchers at the CCCS, for instance, Charlotte Brundson and David Morley, Jan Connell and Lydia Curti, and thence made its way into the mainstream of media studies” [5].

2.3. A previous mentioning of the concept at John Fiske

We will insist more on these paragraphs later, in order to emphasise some alterations or omissions of U. Eco’s afore mentioned ideas. Till then, we find it important to refer to another place where J. Fiske spoke of aberrant decoding even earlier. It is his famous book, Introduction to Communication Studies (first edition, 1982), which, on the one hand, made Eco’s term to be widespread, but which, on the other hand, led to a reductionist understanding and a partial deforming of the original concept. It wouldn’t be the only case. We would refer, for instance, to R. Jakobson’s case, who, under the name of phatic function, brought back to life B. Malinowski’s concept «phatic communion», but, on the other hand, reduced its sphere of use.

In our opinion, the sentence by which J. Fiske reduces the sphere of the concept «aberrant decoding» is the following: “The problem occurs mainly with iconic codes – verbal languages are usually so different that no decoding is possible” [6]. The author continues with a highly interesting example in order to support his idea: “Prehistoric cave paintings of animals have normally been read as conveying graceful, light-footed movement that seems to defy the law of gravity; but Margaret Abercrombie (1960) has argued that the paintings are, in fact, of dead animals lying on their sides. Our love of living animals and distaste for dead bodies has led us into an aberrant decoding” [7].

3. Umberto Eco’s initial approach of the issue and further alterations

The intentional omission or even the rejection of language / verbal communication from the field of application of the concept «aberrant decoding» is really striking from the very beginning. Passing over the different types of aberrant decoding as presented by U. Eco, J. Fiske does not mention language (see supra, 2.1.). Or, U. Eco, while identifying four kinds of aberrant decoding, had also referred to language, even within the first category. But we had better see at this point Umberto Eco’s classification, so as to compare it with J. Hartley’s simplified one:

(a) “first of all for foreign people who didn’t know that particular code (as is the case for us with the Etruscan language)” [8];
(b) “for future generations, or people from a different culture who would superimpose a different code on the message (this is what happened in the first centuries of Christianity, and even after, when a pagan image was interpreted as a holy one; the same thing would happen today to an Oriental who new nothing about Christian iconography and so could mistake an image of St. Paul for a warrior, since by convention he carries a sword)” [9];
(c) “for different hermeneutic traditions (the romantic interpretations of a sonnet of the Stilnovo school which would understand as erotic images what the poet conceived of as philosophical allegories)” [10];
(d) “for different cultural traditions, which understand the message as if it were based on their code rather than on that in which it was originally cast (thus the Sixteenth Century scholar could take as a mistake in perspective the picture by a primitive conforming to the conventions of ‘herring-bone’ perspective rather than to Brunelleschi’s rules)” [11].

All this being said, we must make the following observations:

3.1. The first alteration of the concept: J. Fiske’s changing of Eco’s examples

At U. Eco, the first type of aberrant decoding, (a), which refers to the case in which a “particular code” is unknown, is illustrated by the deficient knowledge which people nowadays (namely, Eco’s Italian contemporaries) have regarded the Etruscan language. J. Fiske does not mention such a thing. While discussing about „the Achaean conquerors [who] misinterpreted Cretan symbols”, he refers, in fact, to an example which Eco offered before drawing the classification in question. In order to introduce the concept of «aberrant decoding», the Italian semiotician had presented the case of an artist from the Palace of Knossos in Ancient Crete, whose message (i.e. the coloured stucco relief of the Prince of the Lilies) was targeted to a well defined community. In fact, his work (which presents all kinds of significant details for the respective culture) was perceived in a totally different way by the Achaean conquerors, to whom the idea of royalty was seen in different terms. To conclude, this would be a case of aberrant decoding which the respective artist has never thought of. Given the interest in iconic code that J. Fiske shows, one can easily understand why the American specialist illustrated the concept of «aberrant decoding» by means of a similar example, referring to those “prehistoric cave paintings of animals”.

3.2. The second alteration of the concept: J. Hartley’s changing of Eco’s examples

Similarly, one must notice that, while rendering Eco’s simplified classification, J. Hartley emphasizes the term language (not code) in the case of the first type of aberrant decoding, while taking the liberty of changing the example given by Eco. He does no longer refer to the Etruscan language, but to the meanings that Ancient Greeks and their descendents had given to Egyptian hieroglyphics until they were deciphered by Champollion. The two examples seem quite similar at first sight. But the Etruscan language is much less known than Ancient Egyptian. One does not even know the family of languages which it belongs to. The writing in which some fragments of texts were transmitted uses a phonetic alphabet derived from the Greek one. Consequently, the words recorded from this language can be easily read, but in very few cases is the meaning clear, which leads to the conclusion that the Etruscan language is an almost closed code to us. On the other hand, the Egyptian hieroglyphics represent some complex writing, mostly ideographical (consisting of figurative signs), not phonetic. Some signs (mainly stylized images) can be read either in their concrete meaning or as symbols or tropes. Thus, in this case, aberrant decoding is frequent, in spite of the fact that hieroglyphics were almost completely deciphered. May J. Hartley have found Eco’s example not a very good one? Probably, since he replaced it.

In fact, he resorted to the same method in the case of classes (c) and (d) which had been established by Eco, with a view to giving priority to the iconic code (just as Fiske did). If at (c) Eco refers to “different hermeneutic traditions”, illustrating it by the erroneous way in which a Renascent sonnet can be interpreted in the Romantic Age (an example of art in linguistic expression), J. Hartley prefers to talk about “different belief systems”, referring to the meanings ascribed by the tourists “to the stained glass windows of cathedrals such as Chartres” (so, here is an “iconic” example). As to what (d) is concerned, it seems that Hartley may have found the example of “perspective” given by Eco (“herring-bone” perspective vs. Brunelleschi’s rules) too complicated; that is why he refers to the way in which white people interpreted the Aboriginal art (which reminds us of J. Fiske’s example regarding prehistoric cave paintings).
4. An extensive critical analysis and theoretical suggestions of the improvement of the approach

What we have made so far was but a “surface” criticism, which resulted naturally from the simple comparison between U. Eco’s original text and J. Fiske and J. Hartley’s summaries based on it. We will now try to make a thorough criticism, followed by some theoretical suggestions.

4.1. A definition of aberrant decoding

Firstly, we must define more accurately the concept of «aberrant decoding» and focus more explicitly on the conditions in which the respective phenomenon is produced. Even if the term itself refers to code, the issue is mainly one of meaning, as J. Hartley showed, although implicitly. He – unlike U. Eco and J. Fiske – uses the term meaning both when defining the concept of «aberrant decoding» and in the typology of the respective reality. Any message must be sent by means of a certain code (either verbal or non-verbal), but what is most important is the transmission of meaning and, in fact, the codes (from which natural languages are the most complex) are systems created with a view to circulating meanings, in order to externalize the content of our conscience, so as to make it known to the others.

What is more, we think that the importance of context in such situations has not been sufficiently revealed. Usually, it is a partial context or a certain context that leads to the misunderstanding of the content of a message, just as the whole context (a larger or more explicit one) facilitates disambiguation of meaning. Here is an example recorded by J. Dewey, in which the message is at a “minimum”: “A visitor in a savage tribe wanted on one occasion ‘the word for Table. There were five or six boys standing around, and tapping the table with my forefinger I asked ‘What is this?’ One boy said it was dodela, another that it was an etanda, a third stated that it was bokali, a fourth that it was elamba, and the fifth said it was meza’. After congratulating himself on the richness of the vocabulary of the language the visitor found later ‘that one boy had thought he wanted the word for tapping; another understood we were seeking the word for the material of which the table was made; another had the idea that we required the word for hardness; another thought we wished the name for that which covered the table; and the last… gave us the world meza, table’.” [12].

Thus, one must state that «aberrant decoding» does not refer (or should not refer) to isolated signs, but to signs which are always placed in a context. A sign (a symbol or an icon) can be misinterpreted not only when the interpreter does not know the context of the message (including the language it belongs to: see infra, idiomatic context), but also when the respective sign is placed in a wrong context (namely when it is taken from the original context and “lost” in another context).

At this point, we find it appropriate to introduce the tripartite distinction that Eugenio Coseriu draws regarding the linguistic content: a) designation (Sp. designación, i.e. reference to extra verbal reality); b) signification (Sp. significado – the content exclusively given by language and through language / competence); c) meaning / sense (Sp. sentido – the content of a concrete communication act, of a text / discourse) [13].

Since we consider the vast field of human communication, we will consider “text” any concrete communication act, be it a verbal act or a discourse, or a painting, an advertisement (as image), a film, etc. All of them can have a meaning, which is more or less evident at first sight. A painting (made by Dali, for example) and a film (by Tarkovski, for instance) can have (and they often do) deep meanings, just as a poem or a novel has. Similarly, advertisements themselves can sometimes be subtle enough.

Consequently, we will define aberrant decoding as misunderstanding of the meaning of a text due to the unknowing (or to the insufficient / partial knowledge) of a code or of a context.

4.2. Linguistic aberrant decoding

We had now better come back to the topic of our article, namely the issue of aberrant decoding within verbal communication (that is its manifestations in linguistic expression). Let us refer now to John Fiske’s statement (see infra, 2.3): “The problem occurs mainly with iconic codes – verbal languages are usually so different that no
decoding is possible”. Even if J. Fiske is quite reserved in being too categorical and uses adverbs such as mainly and usually, we have already noticed that he practically excludes language (verbal communication) from the sphere of manifestation of aberrant decoding, confining himself to iconic codes. He is not the only one who shares this belief. Another advocate of this idea is Mihai Dinu, a Romanian theorizer of communication, even if he does not use the term aberrant decoding: “The so-called «advantage» of artistic non-linguistic expressions, namely that they do not need to be translated, is only apparent, since there is still translation here, even if it is done in a different way. The observer interprets what he sees according to his own cultural models, which denies access to the real content of the work. If one expects a French who sees in a Romanian butcher’s the inscription miel [meaning ‘lamb’ in Romanian – our note] to naively think that one can buy miel [meaning ‘honey’ in French – our note] from there, once he is aware that he is in a different country whose language is different from his, while, as an art lover, there are more chances to understand ‘in his language’ a piece of artistic work belonging to another culture, without being aware of the incongruity of his aesthetic attitude.” [14].

Here is, however, an exception to “Mihai Dinu’s rule”. We found the following happening (which is said to be real) in George Topârceanu’s (a Romanian writer) memoirs, entitled Pirin-Planina: after it had rained heavily, a deep hole was flooded, but, during the night, the water dried up, leaving behind a dead, drown mouse. Both a Bulgarian soldier and his Romanian prisoner were staring at this mouse. At some point, the Bulgarian said: “Mişcâ!” pointing to the mouse, and the Romanian answered, puzzled: “Mişcâ?! Damn it! […] Can’t you see it’s dead?”. The confusion is clarified by the narrator, who mentions that in Bulgarian the word mişcâ means ‘mouse’. Even if the Romanian knew that the word had been uttered by a Bulgarian, in that moment (not speaking Bulgarian), he imagined that he had heard a Romanian word. Indeed, in Romanian, mişcâ is the form of present indicative, third person of the verb a mişca ‘to move’, which explains the Romanian’s reaction in such a situation.

St. Augustin referred to similar cases when, discussing about «ambiguity» in De dialectica, X, 19-20, states that some cases of ambiguity are caused by the diversity of languages. He gives the example of the word tu, which means something in Old Greek (gr. to is the masculine definite article in the Genitive), while in Latin it has a different meaning (lat. tu is the personal pronoun, second person, singular, Nominative). St. Augustin also states that only a person who knows both languages can clearly grasp this ambiguity.

Such confusions can obviously be avoided by giving or enlarging the context. An extreme example, caused by the superposition of two languages (or idiomatic contexts) is given by Umberto Eco himself: “An example of such a situation can be given by the pun well-known to schoolchildren: I Vitelli dei romani sono belli. If we refer the sentence to the Italian language code, it means: ‘The Roman calves are beautiful’; if we refer it to the Latin language code, it means: ‘Go, Vitellus, to the war cry of the Roman god’.” [15].

4.3. The superiority of language / verbal communication over non-verbal communication

We believe that the limited and inadequate way concerning the issue of language related to aberrant decoding (and to non-verbal communication in general, as well) is due to factors such as:

1) linguistic insufficiency: the incapacity of the English language (the language of science nowadays) to express some fundamental distinctions referring to languages, which speakers of other languages make intuitively. As compared to French (where there is a tripartite distinction langage – langue – parole), Italian (linguaggio – lingua – favella/parlare), Spanish (lenguaje – lengua – habla[r]) or Romanian (limbaj – limbă – vorbire) etc., the English language does not have this possibility: it only offers the distinction language (or tongue) – speech (just as in the case of Latin, German, Russian, etc). In other words, unlike the French, for example, the English speakers think of the term language both in its meaning of Fr. langage (language in general) and of Fr. langue (a particular language). Such an insufficiency of a language can lead to differences in rendering (and understanding) some concepts or realities, not only in the field of sciences, but also in religion (it is a known fact that, when translating the Bible from Old Greek into Latin, St. Jerome could only use in his Vulgata for the Greek term logos, which is so rich in meaning, its Latin equivalent, less appropriate, verbum, and thus partly altering the biblical message).
2) *terminological insufficiency*: the use of the term *code* to refer to «language» has led to the idea that language is a code among other codes, a code like any other; similarly, the *linguistic sign* has come to be considered as a type of sign among other types of signs that semiotics deals with. It is R. Jakobson who is partly to blame since he was fascinated by the sciences of communication, which were on the rise in the 50s. He borrowed the terms *code, message, channel,* etc., from the theory of communication and hence facilitated their circulation. However, one should have realized that the generalized use of the term *code* was far from being a clever solution: language is the only “code” in which all the other codes can be “translated”, while no other code / semiotic system can “translate” language. What is more, the *word* (as a “linguistic sign”) is different from the other categories of signs belonging to other codes because it does not “stand for something else”: the word is a signification (i.e. a content of conscience) to which a sound (or graphic) expression is associated in order to become intersubjective.

3) *a prejudice / a theoretical error*: the exaggerated importance given to non-verbal communication, to the detriment of verbal communication, according to the rule 7% – 38% – 55% formulated by Albert Mehrabian. In 1967, Mehrabian published two studies based on some experiments regarding the communication of emotions (positive and negative), the results leading (on average) to the percentages above mentioned, namely : words account for 7%, tone of voice accounts for 38%, body language accounts for 55%. Unfortunately, these figures have been generalized, as if the distribution of the different types of communication respected Mehrabian’s rule in any message (even if Mehrabian himself has always opposed such generalizations). Moreover, Ray Birdwhistell, a pioneer in kinesics (i.e. the science which studies body language), estimated that not more than 35% of the social meaning of a conversation is carried by words.

All these have made some people consider that non-verbal communication is much more important than verbal communication / language, which is definitely an error. In particular cases, in a given concrete communication act, body language can prove itself more important, sending more emotions and information about interlocutors than words do. Nevertheless, at a general or universal level, things are different. However, one must establish what the essence of human communication lies in, see things from a qualitative, not quantitative point of view. It is the language that helps a man differentiate himself from the other animals, changing him into a cultural / spiritual being, in *homo sapiens* or *homo symbolicum*. It is through language that he can acquire conceptual and discursive thinking.

More than that, non-verbal communication is the one which permanently relates to verbal communication and not the other way round. This fact becomes obvious the moment we take into consideration the six well-known functions of non-verbal communication identified by the specialists in this field: complementing verbal messages, substituting for verbal messages, accenting verbal messages, contradicting verbal messages, repeating verbal messages, regulating verbal messages.

Both paintings and musical pieces, for instance, are included in the large sphere of non-verbal communication. They can convey impressions, emotions, etc., but when it comes to understanding their “message” / meaning, this “message” / meaning must be verbalized.

Moreover, experts in publicity have noticed that, in the case of images from commercials, the words associated to images have the role of consolidating the meaning of the picture (which, otherwise, would be “polisemous”). Similarly, in Rhetoric of the Image (1964/1977), Roland Barthes referred in this case to two functions of the linguistic message: anchorage and relay. By means of a few words, one may get the correct decoding of an image (iconic code), thus being oriented to the meaning intended by the author of the advertisement.

As already seen, all of the three factors mentioned (the linguistic insufficiency of the English language, the terminological insufficiency, the prejudice / theoretical error) have contributed to the creation of a false image regarding the importance and complexity of verbal communication. The insufficiency of the English language (not only in the case of the term *language*, but also in that of *meaning*) can be eliminated – in the scientific discourse – by means of some clear delimitations. Ferdinand de Saussure’s distinction *langage* = *langue* + *parole* is equivalent, in N. Chomsky’s terms, in the case of the English language, to *language* (as *langage*) = *competence* + *performance* or *language* (as *langage*) = *language* (as *langue*) + *speech*. Finally, one must state that verbal *communication* must be translated here as *language*, namely Saussure’s *langage*, not *langue*. 
Similarly, in Jakobson’s semiotic model, code means ‘language’ (as langue) and message – ‘speech / discourse’ (parole).

One will thus get a more adequate image regarding the amplitude of verbal communication. Languages, seen as “langues”, are considered instruments of communication which are more accurate than any other codes (such as the iconic one, for instance), which led to the idea – expressed by J. Fiske, who shares U. Eco’s ideas at some extent – that aberrant decoding is a rare or even absent phenomenon in the case of “verbal languages” (see supra, 4.2.). As already proved by the two functions (anchorage and relay), a few words would be sufficient to clarify the meaning of an “iconic” advertisement. On the other hand, one must be aware that language as langue is only an aspect of language as langage: language is abstracted from speech and the latter is very complex, making use of other elements and complementary activities (often including the non-verbal ones).

Thus, some of Eugenio Coseriu’s ideas are worth mentioning here: “Language [as langue] is the common basis of linguistic historicity of the speakers and everything that is said is done in a language which gets partly manifested in its concrete form, in speech. At the same time, speech is saying something new by means of a language; and very often, the novelty, which has never been said before, can be inserted into tradition and can, in its turn, become a ‘language fact’.

Apart from these, in any moment, what is effectively said is less than what is expressed and understood. Still, how is it possible for speech to signify and be understood beyond what is said and beyond language? Such a possibility is given by the expressive complementary activities, and mainly by the circumstances in which people speak, namely the frames [...] The frames orient any speech, endowing it with meaning and can even determine the degree of truth of the given sentences [our translation].” [16]. In the same study, Coseriu explains what he understands by “complementary activities”: “Speech also resorts to non-verbal complementary activities – such as gestures, mimicry, the different ways of expressing manners, even silence – that is intentional deference of the verbal act [our translation].” [17].

4.4. The classification of frames and contexts, according to E. Coseriu

Therefore, in order to determine the correct place and way in which aberrant decoding is produced in speech (verbal communication), one needs a classification of the different types of frames and contexts, that is of all the circumstances that can lead to cases of aberrant decoding. In what follows, we present E. Coseriu’s classification, made in the 50s, which is the most complex classification of frames (according to some specialists). We have found it appropriate to render both the original Coserian terms and the definitions of their corresponding concepts [18] (for the study in which the classification was made was written in Spanish), along with the English equivalents / translations given either by H. Geckeler [19], Coseriu’s disciple, or by us where necessary.

There are four possible basic types of “entornos” (= ‘environments / surroundings’), with further subdivisions:

I. SITUATION (situación: “el «espacio-tiempo» del discurso, en cuanto creado por el discurso mismo y ordenado con respecto a su sujeto” / “the «spacio-time» of the discourse, something that is created by the discourse itself and arranged according to the topic of the discourse”):

1. [unmediated situation] (situación inmediata: “creada por el hecho mismo de hablar” / “created by the act of speech itself”);
2. [mediated situation] (situación mediata: “creada por el contexto verbal” / “created by the verbal context”).

II. REGION (región: “el espacio dentro de cuyos limites un signo funciona en determinados sistemas de significación” / “the space in between whose limits a sign functions in systems determined by meaning”).

Three types can be distinguished:

1. Zone (zona: “la «región» en la que se conoce y se emplea corrientemente un signo” / “the region where a sign is currently known and used”);
2. Sphere (ámbito: “la «región» en la que el objeto se conoce como elemento del horizonte vital de los hablantes o de un dominio orgánico de la experiencia o de la cultura” / “the region where the object is known as the speakers’ vital horizon or as an organic «space» of experience or cultures”);
3. **Vicinity (ambiente)**: “una «región» establecida social o culturalmente” / “a «region» socially and culturally established”).

III. **CONTEXT (contexto)**: “toda la realidad que rodea un signo, un acto verbal o un discurso, como presencia física, como saber de los interlocutores y como actividad” / “all the reality that surrounds a sign, a verbal act or discourse, as physical presence, as the interlocutors’ knowledge and as activity”;

Once again, three types are distinguished:

1. **Idiomatic context (contexto idiomático)**: “language itself as «background» of speech”;
2. **Verbal context (contexto verbal)**: “discourse itself as «background» of all its parts separately”:
   a1) inmediato [unmediated] and a2) positivo (“aquello que efectivamente se dice” / “what is effectively said”);
   b1) mediato [mediated] and b2) negativo (“aquello que se deja de decir” / “what is not said”);
3. **Extraverbal context (contexto extraverbal)**: “all the circumstances of linguistic nature that are not directly perceived by speakers”) with the subtypes:
   a) Physical context (contexto físico);
   b) Empirical context (contexto empírico);
   c) Natural context (contexto natural);
   d) Practical or occasional context (contexto práctico u ocasional);
   e) Historical context (contexto histórico):
      a1) particular a2) actual
      b1) universal b2) pretérito [past];
   f) Cultural context (contexto cultural).

IV. **UNIVERSE OF DISCOURSE (universo de discurso)**: “el sistema universal de significaciones al que pertenece un discurso (o un enunciado) y que determina su validez y su sentido” / “the universal system of meanings to which a discourse (or a sentence) belongs and which determines its validity and meaning”).

Eugenio Coseriu reconsiders the concept of «universe of discourse» forty years later in a more thorough study [20] and finally distinguishes only four types of universes of discourse, corresponding to the four fundamental ways of human knowledge: a) the universe of common experience; b) the universe of science (and of the scientifically founded technology); c) the universe of fantasy (and implicitly of art) and d) the universe of faith.

5. The analysis of some examples of linguistic aberrant decoding

*The Cultural History of Human Stupidity (Az emberi butuság kultúrtörténete, 1938)*, written by Ráth-Végh István, also records an excellent case in point of very aberrant decoding. A renowned French geographer, Father Domenech, also known as a specialist on the issue of Red Skins (for he had travelled in Northern America) found in a Parisian library a mysterious notebook, entitled *The Savages’ Book*. Since it contained all kinds of odd figures and drawings, which are said to have been made (according to the library entries) by some Red Skins in America, the assiduous researcher started to study the material thoroughly and in a few weeks’ time he gave the following interpretation: “The figures are nothing else but the ideograms of the ancient writing of Red Skins. They are of considerable scientific importance, allowing people to go deep into the ancient mysteries of the Red Skin culture and thus elucidating some periods from their history [our translation].” [21]. Fearing that somebody might “steal” his discovery, the French scholar – whose “discovery” had already created a sensation among the Parisian researchers and thus highly welcome – published his results while aspiring to an Academy Award. His book was issued in 1860 and immediately caused the indignation of a famous German bibliographer, J. Petzholdt, who proved in a 16 page leaflet (published in 1861) that, in fact, *The Savages’ Book* was only “the drafts of a German pupil from America. The boy must have lived on a distant plantation and, out of boredom, he doodled all kinds of abracadabrant figures and lines [our trans.]” [22]. For instance, a silhouette with a whip was not at all a wizard, but a teacher whipping his student. Or “the longish mysterious figure is not at all the symbol of lightning or that of divine punishment, but only a common sausage. The six-eyed figure is not the wise and brave captain of a tribe, but only a monster born out of the child’s fantasy. There are not three priests holding cult objects in
front of their mouths, but three children eating pretzels [our trans.]’’ [23]. And there are many more similar examples…

Surprisingly enough, the error could have been easily avoided if the French learner had at least known the Gothic letters (not necessarily German), since anyone who knew German would have explained him that under most of the so-called “ideograms” there were many explanatory German words. He had also thought that a group of drawings was referring to the “fire drink”, namely “the spirit destroying people”, when, in fact, “the savage” had clearly written next to it Honig ‘honey’…

Such true stories may have also inspired the English writer Charles Dickens, who created a similar funny episode whose protagonist is a memorable character, Mr. Pickwick (from the novel *The Pickwick Papers* [1836]). He is convinced that he made a huge archeological discovery when he found, in front of a cottage, a plate (which was old enough, judging by appearances) on which read the following inscription: BILST UM PSI S. M. ARK. Mr. Pickwick buys the plate from a villager and exhibits it in London, next to “a variety of ingenious and erudite speculations on the meaning of the inscription” [24].

In fact, the discovery had caused great rumours and controversies, so Mr. Pickwick himself “wrote a Pamphlet, containing ninety-six pages of very small print and twenty-seven different readings of the inscription” [25]. And the narrator continues with unfeigned irony to tell us that “Mr. Pickwick was elected an honorary member of seventeen native and foreign societies for making the discovery; that none of the seventeen could make anything of it; but that all the seventeen agreed it was very extraordinary” [26].

The mystery is solved by a certain Mr. Blotton, who visits the original place of the plate and questions its former owner. The research being done, it showed that – even if the plate seemed quite old, the inscription was quite new and had been engraved by the one who sold it to Mr. Pickwick. Actually, it read “Bill Stumps, his mark” – the former owner, Bill Stumps, did not seem to care about either grammar or spelling, hence the confusion. It is clear that nobody believed Mr. Blotton, who was considered an ill-willed person whose research was meant to slander the great Pickwick…

We believe that the above mentioned examples, Domenech and Pickwick’s cases, prove the importance of knowing the extraverbal context with a view to correctly decoding a message. It is true that in the first case, *The Book of the Savages* was not considered to be ideographical writing, but rather (childish) iconic communication, whose decoding could have been done through the function of relay, thanks to its accompanying words. In the second case, aberrant decoding (in all its 27 versions) is caused because of not knowing the occasional context and by the wrong segmentation of the text of the inscription.

In these anecdotal examples (both real or imaginary), Domenech and Pickwick’s decoding is aberrant since readers are given the correct decoding in the end. In other situations, on the other hand, we can only state that there are cases of probable / uncertain aberrant decoding since no correct, fully accepted decoding has been given so far. Similarly, further examples, such as the ones given by R.-V. István and Charles Dickens, can be mentioned, real examples, whose answer is questionable: *The Rohonczi Codex* (a controversial document from the XVIth century, supposedly written in Dacian (!) letters, in the Wallachian language, insufficiently deciphered) or the Ezerovo ring (discovered in 1912, in Bulgaria) on which there is a short inscription of 61 Old Greek letters in scriptio continua, supposedly belonging to the Thracian (unknown) language.

### 6. Writing as a source of linguistic aberrant decoding

As a consequence, multiple difficulties can appear in such cases, mainly when writing is involved. For example, one can master the alphabet / writing system, but not the language of the respective text; in other cases, the language can be acquired, but the writing cannot be deciphered, etc.

May writing be a linguistic issue? Coseriu [27] states that: “Linguistics […] deals exclusively, first of all, with the articulate language and, secondly, with the other systems which only reproduce it.”. Obviously, not every type of writing represents the subject matter of linguistics: “Thus, writing, in its most common aspects, is nothing else but a system of symbolic signs parallel to articulate language, since this reproduces it by means of other signs. Unquestionably, this is not the case of any type of writing, since pictographic writing, used by many
‘primitive’ peoples, does not translate in a parallel way phrases and words, and neither does the ideographic writing, such as the Chinese writing, which does not represent phonic words, but ideas, concepts, and thus constitutes a partly autonomous system, which can be read ‘wordless’ and could be interpreted not only in Chinese, but in any other language. However, the most used types of writing, such as the syllabic and phonetic ones, reproduce, more or less precisely, the articulate speech” [28].

7. Intraidiomatic vs. interidiomatic aberrant decoding

So far we have tried to characterize aberrant decoding and determine the essence of one of its aspects (which could be called linguistic aberrant decoding), according to the aims mentioned at the beginning of the paper and within the space limits imposed by such a research. We are convinced that, in the case of an agglomeration of facts, more types of classification are required, in accordance with different criteria. For instance, if we consider the idiomatic context, we could speak of: a) intraidiomatic aberrant decoding and b) interidiomatic aberrant decoding.

Intraidiomatic aberrant decoding appears when communicating in only a language. For instance, one can quote the famous dialogue: Heaven, man, don’t you know the King’s English? No, Sir, is he? The misunderstanding comes from the fact that don’t you know the King’s English has a phraseological meaning, which can be rendered by ‘can’t you understand English’, while taken word for word it means ‘don’t you know the King is English’. The source of such aberrant decoding is the level of expression, a sort of homonymy which appears in ambiguous verbal context.

On the other hand, interidiomatic aberrant decoding can be generated by both the level of expression (see the example with mișcă in Romanian and Bulgarian and I Vitelli… example, in the case of Latin and Italian) and the level of content. Ioan Pânzaru (to whom we also owe the afore mentioned example) mentions the classical case of the translation of an English sentence: All flesh is weak into French as Toute la viande est maigre. In fact, it means ‘Body is predisposed to sin’, but it becomes ‘All meat is lean’ [29].

8. Terminology, ideology and linguistic aberrant decoding

In the case of terminologies, one has to consider, on the one hand, the fact that the technical-scientific terms are correctly defined with reference to the universe of discourse to which they belong. On the other hand, one must observe that “la distinción entre voces usuales y voces técnicas estriba enteramente en la diferencia entre «zona» y «ámbito»: las voces usuales se consideran como propias de «zonas»; las técnicas, como propias de «ámbitos».” (“the difference between common words and technical ones fully consists in the difference between «zone» and «sphere»: common words are considered as belonging to «zones», while the technical ones – to «sphere»”; our translation) [30].

For example – to refer to the terms we have already discussed – in the sphere of Saussure’s linguistics, the terms langue and parole (scientifically delimited, according to objective criteria) do not correspond entirely to the common French words langue and parole. If these differences are not known, the correct meaning of a scientific text cannot be grasped by some inexperienced receivers and, consequently, the result is another case of aberrant decoding.

Similarly, with reference to the issue of ideologies, an ideological discourse can be misinterpreted if one does not know the ideology it is based on or the historical context, be it of a particular or universal, present or past type. At the same time – in order to adhere to the topic of this conference – , one must determine the extent to which ideologies can affect some terms or words so as to change their meaning. It was said, for instance, that in “the language of Communism” or in “the language of Nazism” words such as blood and ground (Blut und Boden) were given different meanings. In fact, as E. Coseriu [31] proved, there are no different significations but different terminological values in the sphere of different ideologies; in other words, these special values (which result from a different way of seeing the designated “realities”) do not belong to signification, but are associated to the signification of the respective words. It is all about ways of using the language, of speaking, and not of
proper languages. However, in order to decode correctly the “message” of an ideological text from the period of
the communist regime, for instance (when the technique of “wooden language” was practised), all these things
must be known; otherwise, interpretation tends to be transformed in aberrant decoding.

9. Evidence of linguistic aberrant decoding in U. Eco’s study

Before concluding this study, we should refer to U. Eco’s article again, in order to see if the great semiotician
himself may have extended verbal communication / language within the respective discussion work or if he may
have shown (in one way or another) more interest in linguistic aberrant decoding than it would seem at first sight.

We have already seen that the most important conclusion of Eco’s study is that in mass media the aberrant
decoding is the rule. Obviously, such an observation does not exclude linguistic aberrant decoding, since mass
communication can be (and it really is, to some extent) also verbal communication (written or spoken) and, on
the other hand, as mentioned before, the “message” of any communication act (including the non-verbal ones)
can be converted into a “linguistic” sign in the receiver’s mind, at the level of understanding. Apart from the
examples of linguistic aberrant decoding explicitly given by Eco, namely the one with *I Vitelli* … and with the
Etruscan language, there are three more other places in Eco’s study which are related to this type of aberrant
decoding:

1) Type (c) from Eco’s classification (see supra, 3.) refers to “different hermeneutic tradition” and the example
of aberrant decoding given is “the romantic interpretation of a sonnet of the Stilnovo School”. Since such an issue
is associated with text linguistics, the expression of the respective aberrant decoding (resulting from not knowing
a traditional culture) is a linguistic one. In fact – just as J. Fiske himself noticed – , poetry is the field where
aberrant decoding is the most frequent.

2) Discussing in extenso the concepts of code and subcode, Eco gives the following example: “The word
disegno (design) and the word leggi (law) have definite meanings in Italian: but the combination disegno di leggi
(design for a law; bill) – which is a metaphor in itself – is not understandable by making reference to the
meanings of the two nouns; to be understood it must be referred to a specialized jargon which gives to this
syntagms a specific meaning. This jargon, which works in relation to the language-code, becomes then a specific
subcode. A listener can have the code but not the subcode” [32]. What Eco mentions in the previous example is
in accordance with what we already said regarding the issue of defining terms in relation to the universe of
discourse to which they belong (see supra). Thus, here is another case of linguistic aberrant decoding.

3) Finally, another case of linguistic aberrant decoding is given in this last example: “The use of a subcode
generally transforms the process of denotation into a process of connotation. The expression winged-boy, in a
poetic-erotic context, must be referred to a mythological reference table (mythological subcode), where not only
denotes a winged child but connotes ‘Eros’. The context, without the form of the message being altered, requires
for its decoding the use of a supplementary lexicon which gives the message another level of significance. The
man without the mythological lexicon, or who doesn’t understand from the context that he needs it, will interpret
the message as the indication of a paradoxical situation. Or he might use the wrong subcode (the Biblical one, for
example) and decode the message in an aberrant way, as if it were a seraph” [33]. In this case, the linguistic
aberrant decoding results from not knowing the cultural context or from misunderstanding some different cultural
contexts.

10. Conclusions

In the light of what has been said so far, it becomes clear that an adequate approach of the linguistic aberrant
decoding has to be done from a comprehensive and integralist point of view, which should not take into account
only the language (as langue), but also the whole verbal communication, in its full complexity. In order to do so,
we have found support mainly in Eugenio Coseriu’s linguistic theory. What is more, our attempt – besides the
fact that we have shown that the phenomenon of linguistic aberrant decoding is worth being taken into
consideration by researchers – has tried to prove the importance of context and meaning, not only that of code – in the case of aberrant decoding in general.

References

[22] István, R.-V., op. cit., 144.
[23] István, R.-V., op. cit., 144.