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On the Semiotics of the Rebus

Paremiologists have even coined a special term for it, *riddle-proverbs*. Similar observations have been made with regard to riddles and spells, riddles and omens, proverbs and tongue-twisters, omens and proverbs and some other types of solutions.¹

Rebus is a well-known expression of human culture. More precisely, it is a sub-genre of riddles and puzzles, doodles etc. and a related genre to anagrams, pictographs, cryptograms, ciphers, crosswords, visual trickery, visual jokes, magic formulas, inscriptions, devises etc. Similarly to the motto of my paper: there are various forms and kinds of the *cliché*, which is a special group of short texts. (The early anthologies of the rebus give a rich collection of traditional variants, as *e.g.* Hoffmann 1869, Delepierre 1870. See also Schenk 1972 *etc.*) The rebus as a text is akin to several other literary and visual forms and genres. Unfortunately, the handbooks of riddles do not discuss rebus separately, see *e.g.* the main bibliography of riddle publications: Santi 1952. And about the rebus as a “genre,” there are only very few publications, see Hain 1966, 52. In Koch 1994, 75–81 there is a summarizing entry “Doodle,” but in the same handbook there is no proper entry for ‘rebus’. A rebus combines written and visual expressions suggesting some witty, not beforehand expected meaning. Usually it contains at least two or more (simple) drawings, referring to at least two or more words or expressions of a recognizable topic, which would be deciphered together with the lingual text.

As for the language base of the rebus, in the simplest of cases a logical *conjunction* binds them together: a picture of a *bull* + a *dog* would be read as *bulldog*. In other simple cases, logical *disjunction* takes apart the words or expressions one from another. *E.g.* *mushroom* will be represented by two drawings: a bowl with

¹ Grigory L. Permyakov. *From Proverb to Folk-Tale. Notes on the general theory of cliché* (Moscow: Nauka. 1979), 146.

porridge [mush] + a room in a house. The “solution” of the rebus may also have double meaning(s). A picture of a temple and of a mountain implicates not simply the meaning “A church standing on the top of a hill,” but also hints to the name of the British statesman, “Churchill.” If the solution (the deciphered word or expression) is not easy to be rendered into a visible form, speech act indicators or logical proposals may be involved. E.g. for the first part of *button*, the contrastive conjunction *but* may be used, and for the second part, *tone* meaning ‘musical sound’. The first section may be depicted by any sign of “negation,” the second one by any musical note. Letters, numbers, abbreviations, algebraic symbols, formulas and operations would be read as words. E.g. for a rebus 4 A -- /a picture of an eye/ **80** (the solution is: “For [four] a [A] long period [--] I [eye] ate [8] next to nothing [0],” which also refers to the distances between the printed signs). Very simple forms (as e.g. *O / A* with the meaning ‘opera’) are internationally well distributed. Numerals read as words are another common practice, and its force is greater, if the connected word is surprising: *A 10 10 10* ‘Athens’ [A + tens]. A printer in Paris (active 1483—1502), Guy Marchant used a picture of a shoemaker’s workshop (!) as the printer’s device with a rebus as its motto: two hands shake, and above them there are two musical notes combined into a sign of division with two words: *fides / ficit* written. The solution is: *Sola fides sufficit* [only the faith counts], where tunes *sol* and *la* form the Latin word: *sola*. (Figure 1) Musical notes and letters superposed one upon the other were very popular in Renaissance rebus, and this tradition reaches even the contemporary rebus publications.

A further specific feature of the language of the rebus is that in written texts the position and direction of the script will be interpreted as a picture. The super scribed *L* above *don* will be read as [L on don] = “London.” Such constructions are at the first sight frapping ones, but the principle can easily be imitated, e.g.: *-if-* will be read as “midwife” (“if” is the middle of the word *wife*). And many similarly complex utterances can in that way be visualised. E. g. *sum night’s dream mer* = “Midsummer Night’s Dream.” Here the main part of the title (“*night’s dream*”) is inserted into the word *summer*. The principle of *charade* (when the boundaries of the words will be regarded or disregarded in a special way) is extremely productive, especially with combining two languages: the Latin *pro libertate!* (“for liberty!”) will be read in Hungarian as *Proli Berta, te!* [“Prole Bertha, you!”], using also the exclamation mark in both cases.

The picture part of the rebus will also be rendered as a “language text.” It is easy to illustrate that statement.

The anarchist French cartoonist Siné in his famous collection of drawings (*Les Chats de Siné*, first edition 1958, several later extended editions, and translated into several languages) combines two words (following their phonetics) in a way that one of those refers to the word “cat” (in French *chat*, pronounced as *sha*), and the whole composition refers to a something new and funny meaning. Typical cases refer to social groups, as *padishah*, *pasha*, *chat-noine* “canon,” or person’s names, like *Chat liapine* “the singer Chaliapin” and wittingly *Chat kespeare* “Shakespeare.” The drawings combine both meanings: a cat is singing (Chaliapin), or the cat is wearing a clergyman’s robe and his tail is formed into a cross (*chanoine*).

Picture and word are inseparably connected to personal names in rebus-like allusions. I will list only some well-known cases.

The *rebus* is as old as human culture, it has existed since the invention of written and visual texts. (Of course, I cannot present here a short world history of the rebus. For more examples see my summarizing essay on the cultural history of the rebus: Voigt 2013.) We know the samples from Ancient Egypt. And the hieroglyphs were also later interpreted as rebuses containing hidden meaning, as it is attested already by Horapollon’s *Hieroglyphica*, the pre-Champollion interpretations of which were also summarized in the critical edition. (Boas 1950) The famous book by Valerianus (1556) describes the Egyptian signs, as well as the signs of other peoples. For a broader context, see Iversen 1993, Baltrušaitis 1985 etc. Picture plus meaning was combined by the Maya, too (see Dienhart 2010). It is important to notice that in non-alphabetic writing (as in Egypt or in Maya script), they could find out the rebus-technique. In the time of European Antiquity, especially in Rome, we find rebus-like usage and that continued also during the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Baroque. (There are good works on Medieval and Renaissance rebus, e.g. Leber 1833, Volkmann 1923, Margolin-Céard 1986, Richer-Goyet 1986 – see as Tabourot 1986, Bässler 2003, etc.) Rebus-like tags are common for the identification of authors. In his writings, Cicero referred to himself with drawings of small peas (the Latin word *Cicero* means “chick-pea”). Albrecht Dürer signed his works with drawings of a small door (in German *Tür* means “door”). The Italian Philosopher Campanella used small bells in the same way (his name means exactly “small bell”). In modern times, e.g. Russian avant-garde poet, Mayakovsky referred to his verses with a drawing of a lighthouse (Russian *mayak* means “lighthouse”).

Coats of arms, pictograms, emblems use the same technique of joining words and pictures as the *rebus*. However, in this paper I shall not discuss their interconnections.

And there are some more complex cases of combining words and pictures, usually with “more than one” meanings of their parts.

One of the most often quoted historical English rebuses was created by Hugh Oldham (his name then was pronounced as *owl-dom*), Bishop of Exeter in the early 16th century. (Figure 2) It is carved on the wall of Exeter Cathedral, showing a smart little *owl* bearing a scroll in its beak, which is showing the letters *d o m*. Thus, the solution is “owl” + “D.O.M.,” i.e. the surname of Bishop Oldham. The latter part is also the abbreviation of the overall known initials *Deo Optimo Maximo* (“to the best and mightiest God”). The drawing looks like a simple piece of heraldry. But the two parts in the carving, the two words and the text using two languages show the typical multilevel *rebus* technique. Its meaning stands also at least on two levels: *don* refers both to the second syllable of the Bishop’s name and to a devotional formula in Latin.

Italian and French Renaissance rebuses (and similar forms) are very rich, and artistic. Among others, we know the original *cifra figurata* of Leonardo da Vinci, the set of drawings in *Hypneromachia Poliphili* of Francesco Colonna (1499), the rebus combining capital letters and simple drawings in *Libro d’Arme & d’Amore nomato Philogine* (by Andrea Baiardo 1520), a love story narrative. A special form, “*Sonetto Figurato*” was published by Giovan Battista Palatino (1540), where the entire sonnet text is transcribed into rebuses. Italian poetic classes of rebus were later imitated and developed by French philologists and writers, including also Rabelais who knew and commented on several rebuses and similar texts.

In terms of the semiotics of rebus, both the visual and the linguistic parts are inevitably “signs,” where *something stands for something else in some respect* (as not only the Peircean semiotic slogan says). It is a pity that I do not know any proper semiotic analysis of the rebus, or, more precisely, no rebus analysis connected to semiotics. My actual attempt can show only some of the basic features of rebus semiotics. (For general terms of semiotics, see Sebeok 1986, an encyclopaedic dictionary with several updated editions.)

In spite of the outstanding and striking visual capacities of the rebus, the basic stratum is the *language*, the text, and not the imagery. Words, compound words, phrases, proverbs and maxims, sometimes even simple texts (referring to simple events and narratives) occur in *rebus*, and drawings or other pictorial strata are only the means to express them. We can exemplify this, if we mention some of the most widely known rebuses.

In rebus books there is an often-quoted story about the correspondence between the Prussian King, Frederick the Great, and Voltaire. The King sent an invitation card to the French philosopher who was then staying at the King's Court in Berlin, with the text: *deux mains venez sous Pé, cent sous scie?* ("Tomorrow will you come to a supper in [the palace] Sanssouci?") = in correct French: "*Demain venez souper à Sans-Souci.*" The pictorial code was: "two hands" *deux mains* = [demain] under the letter P ("sous pé" = souper), then a letter *a*, and the fraction *6/100* [cent sous six] referring to the name of the palace *Sans-Souci*. By the way, the name of the palace means "without sorrow." The reply letter of Voltaire was equally ingenious: *Gé a grand, a petit* ("j'ai grand appétit" = I am very hungry). Here the pictorial code refers to the size of the letters: Big G and small a, which can be simply written as *G a*. Of course, using rebus letters was a well-known common practice in Europe, and Frederick's dinner invitation and Voltaire's reply is quoted in almost every history of rebus in Europe. The same *G grand a petit* letter rebus occurs already in the seminal book by Geofroy Tory's *Champ Fleury* (Paris, 1528: XLII), in a remark "font de ceste lettre G, & dun A. vne diuise resueuse en faisant le A, plus petit que le G. & le mettant dedans ledit G. puis disent que cest a dire. *J'ay grant apétit.*"

A rebus text may be read in linear form (in our script tradition from left to right and from top to bottom). Also, while reading, usually two levels are contrasted: orthography and phonetics, and very often in two languages; or the official spelling with dialectal or innovative language variants are contrasted. Distortion and re-combination of the elements of the text are necessary for the understanding of the meaning. The style and shape of the letters will be understood in the same way. LAW means thus "lawful," and the same solution arises if we write the word "full" vertically ("low-full"), too. Letters and signs /abbreviations work together: a rebus for *Chou & Lai* [the Chinese politician Chou En-lai] uses the conjunction symbol in English, and for *Maots & Tung* [the Chinese Politician Mao Tse-tung] the same conjunction was used in French (*et*). Here again two languages are involved into one rebus text. The French writer, Georges Perec, has created text with the symbol '&' as for a *pastiche* of scientific publications, including also fictitious names as of "scholars" *Else & Vire* and *Mace & Doyne*. (I hope there is no need to explain the solutions.)

For the rebus-creator, the most important thing is to find the appropriate visual representation for the funny text. For the name *Montgomery* it is easy to find a *pun*: "a Mount goes to marry," but it is not simple to visualize the expression.

Also, for the visual part, the rebus pictures usually have double meanings. In art, the pictures denote the “object of art” (a portrait, a landscape, a battlefield etc.). In rebus, the picture is a representation of a word (phrase, etc.). Thus, the word “ham” may be the hollow of the knee – and a piece of smoked pork. The last part of the city name *Nottingham* can be visualized by either of the two. For the first part, the *Nothing ~ Notting* equation comes first to the mind. Then the two parts (nothing + ham) can be combined if (e.g.) the picture shows an empty ham can. Diligent rebus fans can figure out such solutions cleverly and almost automatically. For the meaning “nothing,” it is typical in rebus to show “nothing,” i.e. something is missing or not visualized in the text. (E.g. an empty O letter, or number 0 may serve for that purpose. And it is “nothing” else but Ophelia’s “nothing.” See *Hamlet* 3, 2: 115–119.)

In general, the visual technique of the drawing is simple, like in the case of cartoons or sketches. Human types are generalized and the distinctive features emphasized. Often seemingly unimportant details count (hairy ears, squint eyes, extremely slim or fat figures). “Father” may be drawn as a “fat heir.” With semiotic terminology, by virtue of the resemblance, such pictures are *iconic signs*. (And neither are *indexical* or *symbolic signs*.)

The pictures follow a sequence, and they can demonstrate the whole story. A widely known rebus is showing a quick scribble on a sheet of paper, and the solution is a quotation from Heinrich Heine’s poem *Loreley*: “*Ich weiss nicht, was soll es bedeuten*” (“I do not know what it means.”) One possible solution for the phrase “the Merchant of Venice,” is indicated by drawing a Jewish merchant, along houses built on “lagoon streets.” The pictures may also have double meanings. A “secretary” may be a person, a state official, a piece of furniture, and there exists also the African secretary bird. Four different drawings may represent “a secretary.” The picture of “goose flesh” or “goose foot” can be made by showing goose’s flesh or foot.

Full sentences require long solutions, e.g. “Always look around you and see that nothing vexes nor crosses your eyes” can also be visualized in the same way: above the letter *U* in the mid of surrounding four times by the word: *look*; then the mark *∩* follows, meaning “and;” and in the final line we read: *C that 0 VXS nor xx UR ii* “See that nothing vexes or crosses your eyes.” (Here *C* means “see;” *0* means “nothing;” *VXS* is “vexes;” *xx* are “crosses;” *UR* means “Your;” and *ii* are similarly “eyes.”)

A semiotic analysis of the rebus should cover all the three major parts (pragmatics, syntactics and semantics) of semiotics.

Pragmatics gives the context for a text to be understood as a rebus. In heraldry there exist cryptic solutions, anagrams, pen names, pseudonyms etc. See e.g. the references to the well-known figure of European farce literature: *Eulenspiegel* (German “owl” + “mirror”), which is easy to visualize. The French writer Stendhal used 171 cryptonyms, the Danish philosopher and writer Kierkegaard (also his original family name is a perfect rebus, means “church-yard”) used concentric circles of pseudonyms. Special publications of rebus pragmatics date back to the Renaissance Age. But rebus pragmatics is in fact used world-wide. *E.g.* in the traditional Japanese theatre *Kabuki* the actors wear *yukata* cloth, whose pictorial designs are traditional rebuses.

Rebus pragmatics arose from the everyday practice of identifying pictures and drawings. Symbols upon female/male lavatory doors are often rather enigmatic, showing contrasted woman’s/ vs man’s clothing, hair style, hats, footwear, umbrellas, etc. And their pragmatics might be “urgent” to realize...

The other source of rebus pragmatics is the witty transformation of pictures and texts alike. A picture of a man cooking in the kitchen may be interpreted in many humorous ways. A calendar showing Friday 13th is bad omen. A clock-face showing the time five to twelve means: last time, or even hints to the soon coming end.

In the whole of human culture pictograms or drawings (especially the symbolic ones) are culture-bound. A lion’s picture has different roles in African, Canadian or Chinese traditions, from King of the Animals to a dangerous beast. Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer’s trademark logo, a roaring lion, is understandable to many, but not to all. If one does not know of the “eternal resurrection” complex of the imaginary phoenix bird, they will misunderstand the rebus with its reference.

The art of writing is important in rebus tradition. To write vertically is something extraordinary in Europe. On the other hand, the Chinese start reading the signs according to that (vertical) system. The difference of writing systems and forms gives good opportunity for rebus. For example, if we use the Hebrew letters *beth*, *aleph*, *nun*, *kaph* (or, in a better way: *kaph*, *nun*, *aleph*, *beth*), it will hint to the solution “Jewish Bank.”

As for the *syntactics*, both the texts and the pictures follow their own syntax which differs from the everyday use. The two channels of syntactics are often interwoven. The rebus is more complicated if different languages are used in it, including the difference between orthography and phonetics.

In 1521 in Asti, a town in Western Liguria, Italian poet Giovan Giorgio Alione's book *Opera Jocunda Johannis Georgii Alioni Astensis, metro macaronico, materno et gallico composita* was published. In this book, we find a series of rebuses composed in the poetic form of "*rondeau d'amours*". One of the texts begins with the lines: *Amour fait moult, sargent dely se mesle* (in the correct form: *Amour fait moût; sargent de lys se mesle*). This line is depicted with five drawings: Amor in a tub pressing wine – sergeant [soldier] -- rasp – lily -- sole. The second line of the poem is simpler: *Car mes cinq sens sont en trauail pour celle*, which is depicted similarly by five drawings: two Carmelite nuns – V (cinq = five) – c (cent = hundred) -- man in works – sow. The two lines express the thought: love makes much trouble, and all of the five senses are affected by it. Alione was using in the text his Astian dialect, the local Italian, as well as the French. The form of the poem follows the *rondeau*, with 8 + 5 lines and a refrain: *Amour fait moult*, and altogether there are sixteen illustrations (depicting the lines or phrases with a simple set of visual signs, see the reprint of the text in Bosio 1993, 78–92). We know also the actual music to the text, from about 1501.

The syntactics of the pictures (and of the words) has to consider specific rules. Letters can be omitted or subsidized. The picture of a simple temporary building, plus the letter *r*, means 'barack' (with one "r"); and a picture of a banana, with one end cut off, plus the signs *n = m*, may stand for Barack Obama (the "end" – *na* was cut off). Another possibility is to combine the surname with the word: *baroque*, exemplified *e.g.* by a baroque building, with the *o = a* equation.

The *semantics* of the rebus is built again on the two levels of pictures and texts. There is the semantic difference between a direct "meaning" and a more general or deep "sense." If we see in a rebus a drawing of "wasp" or a "bee," we can choose either of the levels of the meaning. Similarly, a "fly" can be understood also as for airlines, air traffic etc. Rebuses also make use of *denotation/connotation* dichotomy. The word Capitol may mean "the temple of Jupiter in Rome" or "the building of the Congress in the United States" – and the drawing will be selected according to the levels of the meaning. A maiden with a Phrygian hat means "Marianne," *i.e.* France. A maiden with an arch may designate Joan of Arc, another symbol of France. A corpulent man, often dressed in the Union Jack, is, of course, the Englishman or England. A bear on the Moon may refer to Soviet astronauts. The pictures generalize, like the cartoons or the mocking pictures. A fat man looks like a tub, an old woman binds to her knee. One Panama hat or a *sombrero* means a Latin American person or a state of affairs there. The well-known *pal-*

indrome: A man, a plan, a canal, Panama is an excellent rebus (depicting a man, a plan, a canal and a Panama hat), with the “bonus” that it reads the same both backwards and forwards. The visual part of the text can easily be rendered.

If the drawings are simple, their meaning is simple, too. They follow the everyday pictorial language: waves stand for sea or lake, three arrows mean electricity or high voltage, skull and bones symbolize danger. A man with a skull in his hands suggest “To be, or not to be?” (And it is easy to elaborate it further on or to make a travesty of it. *E.g.* the same man has not a skull, but a bee in his hands...) The mass media shows thousands of visual signs and they can be borrowed from the basic units of the rebus. Red star, red cross, red crescent, several stars above hotel entrances or on cognac bottles can be understood worldwide – and we do not realize the originally enigmatic character of the picture. On the other hand, the decipherment is not always given to anybody. Not everybody knows that a “lone star” may refer to the State of Texas.

In confronting the orthography with phonetics, there are differences between languages. The standard rules of pronunciation are simple in Italian and Hungarian. On the other hand, French and English give a wide possibility of pronouncing something in various ways. The French *moi* (“me, I”), *moins* (“less”) or *mois* (“month”) sound very similar. The common phrase *c’est* (“it is”) can refer to hundreds of different phrases, *i.e.* to hundred different pictures, too. The English *pear* and *pearl* evoke very different drawings, but both may occur in rebuses as [pearl]. Multilingual rebuses frequently use such forms. *Hamburger* in (American) English is a loan word from German, with the original meaning “of the city of Hamburg,” and it is not related to “ham.” Its continuations, as *Cheeseburger*, deepen the mistake for the word “ham.” Language puns are not always translatable (as *e.g.* the “false” comparison *moth/mother/modest*); language peculiarities (*e.g.* French $4 - 20 - 12 = 92$ for the counting) are not transferable either. The names of the days of the week are sometimes apt for rebus. Russian *sreda*, German *Mittwoch* suggest “the mid of the week,” meaning ‘Wednesday’ – whereas the English for it does not have the same capacity.

At the end of my preliminary sketch of rebus semiotics I have to offer two remarks.

I was dealing only with the simple forms of rebuses. There are many more developed forms. Italian Renaissance (see above), then the so-called *Rebus di Picardia* (1491–1506) already show highly elaborated sets of pictures and complicated texts (see *e.g.* Thorel 1902). Rebus journals and other publications have

been held in high esteem by the enthusiasts ever since. Marcel Danesi, professor of semiotics at the University of Toronto, published a summary of *The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life* (2002), framing the rebus into the larger context of human cultures.

My second remark is about the differences in rebus traditions. Even if the principles of the rebus are the same in the whole world, it is easy to find the differences between Dutch, French, German and Austrian, English and American (etc.) rebuses. The same may be said concerning the historical stratification of the rebus. To describe this will be the subject of another study. In the present paper, I could only outline some important features of the rebus, explained in Peircean—Morrisian semiotic terms.

I was not dealing with Hungarian rebus data which are not as rare as general opinion maintains. They might reflect the European tradition of riddles and rebuses. When writer Mór Jókai in his 1876 short novel, *A debreceni lunátikus* ["A Lunatic in Hungary"] is quoting a Latin maxim, *o quid tua te b bis bia abit*, he refers as to the source the 18th century Protestant college literature in Hungary. [The solution is around the Latin preposition *super* ("above, over, upon"), and the words read expressing the "upon" situation as *o, superbe, quid superbis, tua superbia te superabit* ("O, superb person! Why are you so proud? Your arrogance will overthrow you!")] In fact, the same play with words was printed earlier in Tabourot's *Bigarrures...* (1595). Not only was the Latin text used in several parts of Europe, during many centuries, but simple drawings of the rebus also shared the same cultural history.

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